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THE STAGE LIFE *of* MRS. STIRLING: WITH SOME SKETCHES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY THEATRE

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MRS. STIRLING AND MISS MARY ANDERSON IN "ROMEO AND JULIET."

Photo: Downey & Co.

THE STAGE LIFE OF MRS. STIRLING: WITH SOME SKETCHES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY THEATRE. *By* PERCY ALLEN. *With an Introduction by* SIR FRANK R. BENSON

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TO

SIR FRANK R. BENSON

IN RESPECTFUL APPRECIATION OF WORK WELL DONE, FOR MRS. STIRLING'S FRIEND, AND HIS—SHAKESPEARE

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INTRODUCTION

When I first saw Mrs. Stirling act, the theatre and the footlights disappeared. One seemed to be looking at incidents in the life of one's fellow men and women, to be overhearing their conversation, watching their struggles, their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears, witnessing the evolution of their inmost soul and being, whether in the person of a great lady or a faithful retainer. The rest of the audience shared this feeling; all round one heard: "That's just what I should have said, or thought, or done." One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.

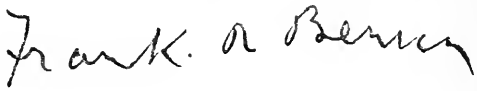
I did not know then that I should shortly have the pleasure of acting with her at the Lyceum in Sir Henry Irving's production of "Romeo and Juliet." When that day came, my first professional engagement as Paris, I met the Capulets' nurse on the stage, and again I felt the same sensation of enlarged life which I had experienced when one of a delighted audience. I was not in the company of Mrs. Stirling, but of a mediæval Italian nurse, so mediæval, so Italian, that she belonged to all time and to all nations, in the midst of the people, the environment, the period of the character she was representing in the spacious days of long ago at Verona, in a place where the ever young heart of the gray old world beat rhythmically, where life was full of sunshine and showers, of laughter and tears. This quickening influence produced in this instance by an artist of three score years and ten is surely a mark of the highest excellence and dramatic and artistic work. On whatever stage, in whatever age the scene was set, the same might be said of her.

To a greater or less extent this vitality seemed to me more frequent in the school of acting to which Mrs. Stirling belonged—including under this heading the Terrys, Kendals, Bancrofts, Sir John Hare, Sir Charles Wyndham, Dame Gêneviève Ward, J. D. Beveridge and the like—than among the younger artists. Not so noticeable, perhaps, in plays dealing with modern subjects, here we seem to have more than maintained the standard of British acting, as in romantic, poetic, and classical drama. Their methods were founded, not on a desire merely to exploit their own narrowing interest, eccentric personality, or self-conscious temperament round which the popular author of the day might be tempted to write an individual character sketch, but rather to enlarge their technique, sympathy, and understanding, so as to gain a capacity to represent as many human souls and bodies as a Garrick, a Talma, or a Robson. Charles Glennie in "Three Wise Fools" is a recent illustration of this sympathetic versatility, equally at home in romantic, melodrama, or domestic comedy. It was this which gave such poetry to that wonderful old nurse in the garden scene with Ellen Terry as "Juliet." I remember my own old nurse, after seeing the play, trotting round to all her acquaintances, asking everyone, "Did you see me on the stage at the Lyceum? Oh, I did laugh when I saw myself there with Miss Ellen Terry and Mr. Irving all so fine." In leisure moments "Nursie" was kind enough to favour me with many an interesting reminiscence and useful hint on stagecraft. From that day to this I carry recollections of wise saws and sayings uttered by her, by Phelps, Miss Terry, Irving, J. B. Howe, Fernandez, Haviland, Tom Meade, and many another. Thus Phelps' "Self-advertisement tends to kill an actor's chief asset, artistic sensibility." Mrs. Stirling in a duet with Irving: "In twenty-five years there will be no poetic or romantic drama, there will be no actors sufficiently trained to present it. Go and work as we did, six new parts a week sometimes; learn to get through your performance thoroughly and perfectly, taking infinite pains whether the audience be large or small, whether they or your fellow actors are drunk or sober; what though there is a hole in the roof through which the rain pours down on

you, and the rats have eaten your favourite grease paint, and the manager bolted with the takings. When you learn to do this you may, with luck, begin to consider yourself an actor." For these artists and their fellows the Stock Company was the school, the older actors the teachers for all who wished to learn, and an audience of *habitual* theatre-goers and keen students of dramatic literature were the examiners. At the time I did not understand the meaning of all they said, but the longer I act, the truer do I feel was their practical theory of art work. They did not call it Art with a big high-browed A, they often called it "Bread and Butter." Many pretended to prefer keeping a beerhouse or a greengrocer's shop, but they suffered and endured, they worked through sleepless nights and hungry days in order to become artists. They denied themselves little luxuries to buy a sword, a buckle, or a little brooch—humble offerings on the shrine of drama. In doing these things they acquired vision and understanding, a generous human sympathy, and that large-hearted charity which ever comes from selfless service. All this will become clear to those who follow the story of "Nursies" life-work in the pages of this biography. Readers will get a glimpse of all the triumph and all the disappointment that went to the making of her, who was the fairy godmother not only of her profession, but of all who came into the sphere of her influence. They will appreciate how that, though the well-graced actors have their hour upon the stage, and then are seen no more, their work lives on after them; and what is good in their achievement lasts for ever, in other hands and generally under other names. That does not matter. The artist's joy is giving. Happy are they whose gifts are as great as Mrs. Stirling's. Readers will learn how to her and a few others it is granted to have certain parts, certain gestures, certain stage business, certain large ideas always associated with their names. What nobler epitaph could stage-worker have ?

Towards the end of her days "Nursie" was kind enough to send my wife some daintily worked artificial flowers and stage embroidery used by her in some of her early impersonations, with kindly encouraging messages of inspiration

and approval; and now I am grateful that it falls to me to add my humble laurel leaf to the crown that has been interwoven by the author in the following pages, for one who was all her days Good friend of the world's children.



AUTHOR'S PREFACE

When, some years ago, I first decided to write an article upon the stage-work of Mrs. Stirling, I had neither the desire nor the intention to make a book. An essay of some four thousand words was all I had in mind; but directly I began to dig a little into the actress's record, I found her personality and her art looming so large in the history of the nineteenth century theatre, that the things I wished to record—and that seemed to me worth recording—multiplied speedily into a formidable pile of manuscripts, containing information that had never before appeared in connected form, but lay scattered, at random, throughout the newspapers, magazines, stage-biographies, and living memories of the last three-quarters of a century. Excepting Joseph Knight's article, in *The Dictionary of National Biography*—clever and just, though too brief, and by no means accurate—there exists, so far as I am aware, no considerable account of this life, that links up the stage of Siddons, the Kembles, and the Keans with that of the Irvings, Miss Ellen Terry, and the Bancrofts.

My project was approved by friends to whom I spoke of it. A well-known actor answered: "One thing only surprises me—that no one has done it before." I determined, therefore, to do that which no man, in these days, should do lightly—namely, to add one book more to the countless tides of volumes that break yearly upon the big world's shore.

Whether my grandmother would have approved of this volume, I do not know. Mrs. Stirling was an actress who lived much for her art, and neither desired, nor sought, publicity for its own sake. That fact I have wished to remember in writing this volume. It has been my wish to write sympathetically—barren indeed is the biography

void of feeling or enthusiasm—but also to set down all faithfully, without sentiment or bias, whether in gauging the individual woman, or in estimating her quality as an actress.

The chief drawback to the subject's interest must lie in the comparatively barren dramatic period during which Mrs. Stirling was fated to live the most active years of her stage-life. Those years produced many great actors and actresses—artists of consummate skill—but of great plays they produced almost none; and if I have been compelled to raise again from dusty death so many dramas that, on their merits might well have lain forgotten where they were, I did so only that there might shine through them Mrs. Stirling's personality and art, and with her, here and there, a glimpse of some of those equally great contemporary figures, who were her stage companions, and her friends. I have sought to show these actors and actresses carrying on and handing down the torch of a fecund and living tradition, through somewhat arid and barren decades; and to show also how, little by little, at last, from the Wigans, through the Bancrofts, our drama began again to be truthful, natural, and free. Should this book—besides adding something to somebody's knowledge of the nineteenth-century stage—also encourage in some younger members of the theatrical profession perseverance, and determination to succeed, in spite of discouragements, I shall be the more rewarded for my pains.

One other thought was present with me while writing. This tale tells, indirectly, of an alienation which affected the course of many lives—that of the writer among them. Incomprehensible, as yet, to our limited understandings, are the seeming chances of life; and within the word destiny—after all no more than a word, as M. Maeterlinck knows—we include facts inscrutable, and "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls." With this book, then, there is linked in my mind the idea of reconciliation. But, apart from all such considerations, the preparation of this story has been of absorbing interest, and of great delight to an individual, part of whose duty it is to write and speak upon subjects connected with the stage.

I have to thank many actors and actresses very warmly, for assistance rendered, and for information most willingly and kindly supplied. The names of Miss Ellen Terry—who supplied me from her memory, as well as from her book—Mrs. Kendal, and Dame Gêneviève Ward, come at once to mind; and also Mrs. Gabrielle Enthoven for giving me access to her valuable collection of play-bills, illustrations, and theatrical lore. Among others, I have also to thank Sir Squire Bancroft for facts, for permission to quote from the Memoirs, Mr. Ben Webster and Dame May Whitty, especially Sir Frank Benson, for information, for valuable advice, and also for writing the delightful little sketch that forms the introduction to this volume. Nor must I forget Sir Arthur Pinero, nor Mr. Fred Grove—for kindly indicating many fruitful sources of knowledge—nor Mrs. Stirling's old friend, Mr. Ben Greet, who was always ready to answer questions.

Among those who supplied me with letters, as well as information, I am particularly grateful to Mme. de Navarro (Miss Mary Anderson), who also was my grandmother's close friend—as readers of the following pages will discover—and also to Mr. Newton Baylis, and Miss Lilian Baylis, of the "Old Vic," who lent me valuable and hitherto unpublished correspondence between Mrs. Baylis, Mrs. Stirling, and Charles Reade, who were a trio of close friends. My mother's recollections are not now very distinct, but she has most kindly told me what she could.

To the following publishing houses I make grateful acknowledgement:

To Monsieur Henry Davray, and Mr. J. Lewis May, for permission to make use of material in an article in the *Anglo-French Review* (July 1920) on Mrs. Stirling, Rachel, and Charles Reade; to Messrs. Hutchinson, for permission to quote from Miss Ellen Terry's Autobiography; to Messrs. John Murray, for the same courtesy in respect to the Bancroft Memoirs; and to the House that owns the copyright of Coleman's *Life of Charles Reade.* Many other names might be added; but their owners will pardon my brevity, and accept a general acknowledgment.

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MRS. STIRLING.

"A reverend Lady."

Comedy of Errors, Act. v., Sc. 1

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The Stage Life of Mrs. Stirling

CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS

1813–32

Birth and family—Stage personalities of her time—Early education—An impoverished family—Goes on the stage, as "Fanny Clifton"—The City Pantheon—First engagement probably at the East London—London of the thirties—Condition of the theatre—Monopoly of the patent houses—Efforts of the minor theatres to end it—Bulwer and Macready assist—Davidge at the Coburg (Old Vic)—"Oliver Twist" as played there—Rough audiences—Fanny Clifton goes to the Pavilion—Experiences there, in melodrama and spectacle—"Cherry and Fair Star" and "The Wreck Ashore"—Meets Edward Stirling—Her crudity, and his—Marries him—Leaves the Pavilion.

Mary Anne Hehl, to whose stage career these pages are mainly given, was the daughter of Captain Hehl [1]—a German, in all probability—whose forerunners in England had come over, my father thinks, with one of the Georges.[2] Be that as it may, the family, I suppose, was by that time completely anglicized, since we hear nothing of German connections.[3] Captain Hehl himself was, in middle life, a portly gentleman of aristocratic, and somewhat haughty, demeanour, capable of wearing with aggressive dignity the beaver hat, and long closely buttoned coat of the period, if one may judge by the portrait, in silhouette, that hangs to-day in my father's dining-room, and is endorsed on the back: "Simon Hehl, 3rd Captain Regiment of Foot Guards, London. Assistant

[1] Not Kehl, as in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

[2] We may dismiss the statement in *Actors by Daylight*, March 24, 1838, that Captain Hehl descended from the celebrated judge, of the seventeenth century, Sir Matthew Hale.

[3] Mr. Newton Baylis—father of Miss Lilian Baylis, now controlling the "Old Vic"—whose mother was one of Mrs. Stirling's intimates, believes that the actress had Irish blood in her.

Quarter-Master-General Horse Guards, London.[1] Was made a Freeman of Dumfries, 1815."

For what service, if any, that compliment was paid to him, in the year of Waterloo, I do not know. His name is not included in the Index of the Burgesses of Dumfries for that year; though we need not therefore suppose that the statement upon the portrait was incorrect, it not being the custom to record upon the list of Freemen the names of honorary burgesses—among whom it is probable that Captain Hehl's name was. The grant was made as a passing compliment, and no more was expected to be heard of its recipients.[2]

Captain Hehl had three children—Charles, who became a bank clerk at Liverpool—Agnes, who played a considerable part—though off this rough world's stage—as Lady Superior in a convent at Bruges; and Mary Anne, who was to be one of the leading actresses of her century.

The girl was born on July 29, 1813,[3] in Queen Street, Mayfair, London, and was educated at the Catholic Seminary, Brook Green House, Hammersmith, and later, it seems, at a convent in France, or at Bruges, whence she returned, to find a most unhappy home.[4] Her father had ruined his family, and sold his commission. All the discomforts of poverty awaited her arrival, and Mary Anne was compelled to earn her own living, as best she might. Out of that seeming evil came good, for, following a true instinct, the girl chose the stage, and it was to her father's improvidence, therefore, that the daughter owed a long early training which, aided by her natural energy, good looks, and talents, were to bring her a great measure of success.

But before we follow her further, let us glance, for a moment, at the nineteenth-century stage. At the time of Mary Anne's arrival in this world, some of the drama's

[1] See the portrait facing p. 160.

[2] Information supplied by Mr. R. A. Grierson, Town Clerk of Dumfries, who has kindly searched the records.

[3] Most of the records give 1815 or 1816. The correct date is from the tombstone in Brompton Cemetery.

[4] *Tallis's Dramatic Magazine*, 1851. Joseph Knight in *Dictionary of National Biography* states that Captain Hehl was at one time Military Secretary to the War Office. It may be true, but his statements concerning these years are quite unreliable.

great names were still in men's mouths. That austere figure, and great actor, John Philip Kemble—"Black Jack," or "Solemn John," as he was known to his contemporaries—was still treading the stage, from which he was about to withdraw,[1] and "of which he had been for thirty-six years the ornament." His sister, the incomparable Siddons, was already in retirement, having made her farewell bow to the public, at Drury Lane, on June 29, 1812.

Edmund Kean, however—that genius whose natural acting, two years before,[2] had put a term to the declamatory style of the Kembles—was now upon the upward course of his meteoric career,[3] having given to London audiences two of the greatest tragic efforts the world has ever witnessed —"Shakespeare by flashes of lightning,"[4] in his "Othello," and, in "Sir Giles Overreach," the most terrific outburst of human passion ever witnessed upon the English stage.

In that same year, 1816, the tragedian who was to succeed Kean, as the representative of our theatre, in its national and poetic aspects, William C. Macready, had come to London, at the age of twenty-three, and was to achieve his first great success, as "Richard III," at Covent Garden, on October 25, 1819.

Of the two leading comédiennes, whom the future Mrs. Stirling was to succeed, the elder, Dora Jordan, discarded by the Duke of Clarence,[5] had just come to a tragic end, dying in France, poor and neglected; while Mrs. Glover, "the soul of humour," then in her thirty-sixth year, was at the height of her fame and popularity.

Of the British stage, in general, at that time, we may say, with truth, that its sky was both sunlit and overcast. Kean's career, though brilliant as the lightning, was to be almost as brief; and with his passing, in 1833, English drama went rapidly from bad to worse, until 1837, when Macready, driven—by the spectacular and other mismanagements of Bunn, and his kind—unwillingly to take up the reins for

[1] The farewell dinner to him was June 27, 1817.
[2] His début, at Drury Lane, in "Shylock," was January 26, 1814.
[3] The cup presented to him by the Drury Lane company, Lord Byron and others, in memory of his first representation of "Sir Giles Overreach" (January 12, 1816), was dated June 25, 1816.
[4] Coleridge's phrase, or Hazlitt's.
[5] Afterwards King William IV.

himself, effected some temporary, but only temporary, improvement.

If, during this first quarter of the nineteenth century, there were yet some great actors upon our stage—of great dramatists there were none. Neither Garrick, Kemble, nor Kean were the means of adding, during their management, any plays of permanent value to our stage. For half a century past, indeed—excepting principally the comedies of Sheridan and Goldsmith—nothing, almost, had come to stay. Outside the classics, our national drama, divorced from literature, and from the great literary movements of the century, was mainly futile, bombastic, artificial; and was destined so to remain for yet another half-century. Among the misfortunes of the lady to whose stage career these pages are given, not the least was this—that she was born, and must live, in so barren a time, and be compelled so frequently to give from her own abundance, "heightening touches to characters but coldly written."[1] Happily for her, upon no actress of her century, I suppose, could that mischance have fallen more lightly, since upon her had been bestowed talents so varied, and a personality so marked, as to enable her, many a time and oft, to overcome an author's deficiencies, and to fashion for herself, out of such airy nothings, "a local habitation and a name."

Accounts of Mrs. Stirling's theatrical beginnings are strangely confused and contradictory; nor am I able altogether to reconcile them. West, according to Russell's *Representative Actors*,[2] states, upon what authority I know not, that Mary Anne's first appearance was in the Ballet at the Surrey,[3] as early as 1827, when she was a child of fourteen. This, though I cannot refute it, I disbelieve.

Joseph Knight—obtaining the information probably from the *Era Almanac*—asserts that she began at the Coburg; and he may be right, though no old play-bills of that house—that I have come across—mention Fanny Clifton's name, as naturally they would not, if her parts were insignificant. Neither Miss Lilian Baylis nor her father is aware of any tradition concerning Fanny Clifton at their house. According

[1] Colley Cibber's Apology. [2] P. 407 note.
[3] I cannot trace her in Surrey play-bills of the period.

to Knight, her work at the Coburg consisted principally of carrying messages, and the like, her first part of importance being "Amelia Wilderheim" in "Lovers' Vows," adapted from Kotzebue.

Mr. Barton Baker, in his *History of the London Stage, and its players*, 1576–1903, differs from Mr. Knight. He states[1] —though without naming his authority—that she began at the Grub Street[2] Theatre, a disused chapel, that had been converted, about 1828,[3] to the cult of the Muses, and was later named the "City Theatre" and afterwards "The City Pantheon."

It was here, according to this chronicler, that "she made her first appearance upon the stage in the humblest walk of the drama, delivering messages, and speaking a few lines."

Did she? Again I do not know; but going through the play-bills of the Grub Street Theatre,[4] I find the following:

THE CITY PANTHEON or School of practical Instruction
for
Elocution, Music, and the Drama
late the City Chapel, Chapel Street, Fore Street, Cripplegate

'Delectando pariterque Monendo'
'Learning's Triumph o'er her barbarous foes
First rear'd the stage.' Doctor Johnson.

The second periodical Exemplification will take place
on Monday, the 3rd of August, 1829,
when the tragedy of DOUGLAS
with new Dioramic Illustration, by Mr. Bedford, and other appropriate accompaniments, will be recited by the Professors, Subscribers and Students, etc. etc.

The City Pantheon is intended to comprise a systematic course of Tuition in Elocution, Action, Dramatic Reading, Vocal Music,

[1] P. 404.

[2] Now Milton St. Fore Street, immortalized in chronicles of the eighteenth century as the abode of the literary hack. Edmund Kean played Shakespearean parts there in May and June 1831, including "Othello." Elton, Buckstone, Vining, Ellen Tree (Mrs. Charles Kean), and other stars played there under Chapman's management. It was destroyed 1836.

[3] Mr. Baker puts the conversion 1830. This is wrong.

[4] Mrs. Charles Enthoven's collection.

Dancing, Fencing, etc.; and to afford students and Amateurs frequent opportunities of respectable practice; and to foster and develop talents which, without such advantages, might be entirely lost to their possessors and the public.

Now this school of acting, eminently respectable—"none admitted to the best tier unless suitably dressed," and so forth—was just the sort of place to which a young lady, with stage-ward aspirations, might go, to learn the rudiments of her chosen profession, especially at a time when her choice of such Institutions was strictly limited. It is, therefore, not impossible that Miss Fanny Clifton should have here begun, though it is also possible that a confusion of names may have arisen between her and Miss Fanny Ayton, a singer "of Italian style," who was there in October 1831, only three months before the other Fanny went, as we shall see, to the Pavilion in the Whitechapel Road.

Here then I should have been content to leave Mr. Baker's choice of Grub Street, as the most probable, did other statements support him. I can find none that do. Such records as I have come upon, all point to the East London Theatre [1] as the place of her first appearance. For example, this, from the *Theatrical Times* of September 19, 1846:

Mrs. Stirling's early efforts were devoted to the study of music under a person who had several pupils intended for the stage, and who for practice were in the habit of singing in choruses in some of the operas. While joining these she evinced a desire to venture on a dramatic life, but finding no encouragement from the parties by whom she was surrounded, she resolved to pay a visit to the east end of the town, and accordingly enrolled herself under a Mr. Amherst, the manager of a very small theatre in that locality, playing, as Miss Fanny Clifton, everything by turns, and nothing long, at a very trifling salary.

An article in *The Players*, of February 25, 1860, adds a graphic detail:

She informed him (Amherst) that she wished to act, that she had never done so, but felt she could if he would let her try. The kind old man agreed that she should try, and in less than a month she appeared.

[1] According to Mr. Baker the East London existed from 1787–1828. It must in fact have endured longer.

Rather less naïvely put, and more convincing, is the corroborative evidence afforded by an article in *Tallis's Dramatic Magazine* for 1851, whose author also asserts that Miss Fanny Clifton first appeared at the East London. This article—to which I may again refer—is very interesting because, unlike others that touch upon Mrs. Stirling's early career, it is evidently the work of someone well acquainted with the actress. There is an intimacy about it, a sympathy, a sentiment even, that suggests personal knowledge. Reading it we feel that we are behind the scenes: it is possible, therefore, that the details may have been supplied by Mrs. Stirling herself.

The writer in Tallis's has just told of the girl's return to an unhappy and impoverished household, and of her decision to try the stage.

> Mr. Amherst, the proprietor of the East London Theatre, listened to her application, and readily received her for a few weeks on trial. She returned home with three parts in her pocket, the study of which she commenced without delay. She was in the way of earning a few shillings a week, and the prospects of the poor girl became bright and more cheerful. It was as Fanny Clifton that the stage neophyte claimed the sympathies of an East London audience for the sorrows of "Crazy Jane." [1]

This was probably in the year 1829.

Her sympathizer continues on the more personal note:

> There is something touching in such an entrance into a laborious and dangerous profession. With none to guide, direct or support her, Miss Fanny Clifton was left entirely to chance impulses, and the unchecked influence of circumstances. The young candidate had, however, although she knew it not, considerable qualifications—in a handsome person, a musical voice, and a store of animal spirits.

Those belated discoveries concerning her physical attractions she doubtless made, soon enough, but the individual who could write thus of them, and of the girl behind them, certainly had met her in person, and we may surely accept

[1] I cannot be sure of the date. Henry Irving, speaking after her last performance, in "Faust," July 31, 1886, at the Lyceum, said that she had been before the London public for fifty-seven years. That brings her first appearance to 1829.

his statement that Fanny returned home with some parts in her pocket.

What were those parts? According to Joseph Knight, they were from John Stafford's "Pretender, or the Rose of Alvery," and Dimond's "Hunter of the Alps," "her principal business being comedy and Singing Chambermaids." These titles may be correct, but his date is wrong, for he gives it as early in 1832, whereas, by that time, she was already at the Pavilion, where, he says, she opened on Easter Monday, for leading business at a salary of £3 per week, as "Susan Oldfield" in "Speed the Plough," and as "Patrick" in O'Keef's one act farce, "The Poor Soldier."

This is not the fact. Farrell did engage her for the Pavilion—perhaps at £3 a week—but not on Easter Monday, nor in either of the parts named, though she may well have played them about this time. The young actress made her first appearance at the Pavilion on January 9, 1832, as "Zephyrina," the Widow, in "The Devil and the Widow," when Madame Céleste, the celebrated French actress and dancer, was also making her début at the same theatre.

* * * * *

But before we follow Fanny Clifton's fortunes in Whitechapel it may be well, for a moment, to remind ourselves of the condition of the drama in the metropolis at that time.

The outer London of those days was a dangerous and difficult world for a young girl to be cast into. Its streets were partially and dimly lighted with gas of small illuminating power. You carried a candle-lantern with you, and sometimes a blunderbuss as well. Link-boys, on dark nights, earned a living by lighting you home; and timid wayfarers would wait—as they do to-day in times of winter fog, or of railway breakdown—until others, bound for the same destination, could afford them company, and courage against footpads or other lurking dangers.[1]

For theatrical folk, in particular—whether player or play-goers—suburban London was neither safe nor convenient. Daily newspapers, in 1827, were priced at sixpence each, and, circulating almost exclusively in the clubs, libraries,

[1] John Hollingshead: *My Lifetime.*

taverns, and coffee-houses, were not easily accessible to the poorer sections of the community. A prospective visitor to the Surrey, or to the Coburg, must to the tobacconist, or the pastry-cook, there to determine, from an inspection of the long, badly printed "Bills of the Play," what dramatic fare was open to his choice.

Such fare—in theory at least—necessarily excluded Shakespearean plays, as Shakespeare wrote them, because the production of "legitimate drama" was still the privilege of the two patent theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, whose managers jealously guarded their rights, and would set the machinery of the law in motion against any proprietors of the "minor houses," as they were called, who dared too openly or grossly to infringe that monopoly. This wrong was rendered all the more exasperating to those who must needs endure it, by the fact that the managements of both Drury Lane and Covent Garden—instead of exploiting the plays for the production of which their theatres nominally existed—were offering crude spectacle and melodrama, with "Real Lions," "Terrific Combats," "Awful Situations," and all the other absurd clap-trap of the showman, set forth in puffing and mendacious bills.

So glaring an anachronism could not long endure. Beyond the immediate interests of the two theatres concerned, the privilege had no friends; and the patrons of the fifteen houses open in London in 1832 were numerous and powerful. An advertisement headed "Cause of the Drama," in the *Sunday Times* of January 8, 1832, informed its readers that there were lying for signature at the Sadlers Wells, Surrey, Royal Coburg, Queens, Pavilion, and other theatres, copies of a Petition to Parliament for the repeal of such Acts of Parliament as tend to create a monopoly in the right of performing plays, etc. On Friday, February 24, following, there was held, at the City of London Tavern, under the presidency of Edward Bulwer, a meeting, "to take into consideration the best means of effectually repelling the attempt of the patent theatres to establish an absolute monopoly of the legitimate drama in this city."

"Reform the stage as we are about to do," said the chairman in the course of his address, "and the literature

of the stage will reform itself." This first necessary clearing of the ground, mainly through the influence of Bulwer, and of Macready,[1] was accomplished, eleven years later, by the Theatres Act of 1843,[2] though the second reform, as devoutly to be wished, could not come until the theatre has passed through nearly another half-century of decline.

Among the individuals most active in evading and combating the hated monopoly, was Davidge, manager of the Coburg, under whom, during her first northern tour, Miss Clifton was soon to serve, if she had not done so already, as Knight asserts.

Davidge was a capable melodramatic actor, excelling especially, "in testy and imbecile old men"—who, after playing leads at that house for some time, had become, in 1826, sole lessee. His seven years of management were marked by a spirit of daring, that was favourably commented upon by the press of the time,[3] and found scope for ingenuity in devising means to produce Shakespearean dramas, that, while still bearing some resemblance to the originals, were yet sufficiently tampered with to keep him upon the windy side of the law. Thus "Othello" becomes "The Moor of Venice," and "The Merchant" dissolves into "The Three Caskets" — disguises as thin as those practised upon us to-day by the Don Giovannis of high opera. Nevertheless, it behoved Davidge to be careful; for although such small fry as the "penny gaffs," and the booth managers of Bartlemy Fair, might do the forbidden thing with comparative impunity —save for an occasional raid—the minor theatres proper were much more jealously watched. The Coburg, indeed, had been successfully attacked by Drury Lane, after Booth's first engagement there in 1819–1820; and the attackers had power to ask for fines and imprisonment against the offenders, in each case of infringement, even though both royal theatres, at that very time, were putting educated elephants at one house into competition with tight-rope dancers at the other, and were filling up the bills with songs

[1] A contemporary wrote: "There should be a statue to each of them (Bulwer and Macready) in every theatre in the land."

[2] 6 and 7 Vic. cap. 68.

[3] E.g. *The Constitution*, November 6, 1831.

kept short, "to enable the singers to do a double turn at Vauxall Gardens."

Illegitimate legitimate drama, however, was not the staple fare, either at the Coburg, during Davidge's management, or at the other transpontine houses. They relied principally upon melodrama, hot and strong, and upon spectacular pieces, not very dissimilar from those that the patent theatres were putting on. In 1832 was performed, at the Coburg, an Indian melodrama, "Hyder Ali," in which the performing lions of Martin, a Frenchman, played prominent thinking, and roaring, parts,[1] while even up to 1840 one finds such unconsciously humorous announcements as this, of May 25, 1839, "The proprietor is happy to inform the public that the Monkeys, Dogs, and Goats having arrived, they will appear together with the Winter and Lehman family."

Play and audiences were alike rough, even though the Coburg people did not perhaps wholly deserve the epithets Kean flung at them, across the footlights, in June 1831:

I have acted in every theatre of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, I have acted in all the principal theatres throughout the United States of America; but in my life I never acted to such a set of ignorant unmitigated brutes as I now see before me.

John Hollingshead[2] has given us, in his racy vernacular style, a vivid description of a performance at the Victoria, as the Coburg had come to be called, of "Oliver Twist," when the part of "Bill Sikes" was played by Mr. E. F. Savile, brother of Miss Helen Faucit, the accomplished and beautiful actress with whom Mrs. Stirling was often to appear.

The gallery of the Victoria was a huge amphitheatre, probably containing about fifteen hundred perspiring creatures; most of the men in shirt-sleeves, and most of the women bare-headed, with coloured handkerchiefs round their shoulders, called "bandanna wipes" in the slang of the district, and probably stolen from the pockets of old gentlemen who were given to snuff-taking. This chickaleary audience was always thirsty—and not ashamed. It tied handkerchiefs together—of which it always seemed to have plenty—until they formed a rope, which was used to haul up large bottles of beer from the pit, and occasionally hats that had been dropped below.

[1] *The Old Vic*, by John Booth, p. 26.
[2] *My Lifetime*, i. 188, 189.

This body of unregenerate playgoers was maliciously tortured night after night, by Mr. E. F. Savile and half a dozen other representatives of Dickens's criminal animal. The murder of Nancy was the great scene. Nancy was always dragged round the stage by her hair, and after this effort Sikes always looked up defiantly at the gallery, as he was doubtless told to do in the marked prompt copy. He was always answered by one loud and fearful curse, yelled by the whole mass like a Handel Festival chorus. The curse was answered by Sikes dragging Nancy twice round the stage, and then, like Ajax, defying the lightning. The simultaneous yell then became louder and more blasphemous. Finally, when Sikes, working up to a well rehearsed climax, smeared Nancy with red ochre, and taking her by the hair (a most powerful wig) seemed to dash her brains out on the stage, no explosion of dynamite invented by the modern anarchist, no language ever dreamt of in Bedlam could equal the outburst. A thousand enraged voices, which sounded like ten thousand, with the roar of a dozen escaped menageries, filled the theatre and deafened the audience, and when the smiling ruffian came forward and bowed, their voices in thorough plain English expressed a fierce determination to tear his sanguinary entrails from his sanguinary body.

There, certainly in plain enough English, is one of the many reasons why middle-class Victorian fathers did not often positively encourage their daughters to venture upon the minor stage; yet it was upon just such a stage—with the Whitechapel Road for the Waterloo Road—that the daughter of Captain Hehl—late of the Foot Guards—found herself definitely launched into theatrical life.

Sensational melodrama, of course, was the stock attraction at such a house as the Pavilion. "As at the Coburg," wrote the *Morning Advertiser*, "the lieges of Whitechapel have ever been remarkable for their attachment to fiery horrors, marvellous incidents, and terrific situations." Here also Sikes' equivalent drags innocent maidens by their hair, and "the gamester dies in agony." To witness these attractions swarmed a populace largely composed of seafaring men, and so numerous, unruly, and uncouth, that one reads occasionally of a boy being trampled to death in the gallery, and of large bottles being flung upon the stage, to the terror of the actors. Sometimes, nevertheless, quality honoured the Pavilion with their august presence, as on September 29, 1830, when "we observed there several magistrates, and two or three families of distinction." Now and again a prostitute, such

as "Lady Melville," would make an uproar upon being refused admission.

The press in general, commenting upon Farrell's success at the Pavilion, marvelled how the thing was done. "We would as soon expect to make a Benefit on Salisbury Plain" —Salisbury plain has seen more players since then, than were dreamed of in 1830—"as to establish a theatre at such an unlikely neighbourhood; yet you (Farrell) have succeeded, and therefore we stamp thee a good manager."

He was at least a bold and quick-witted one; for when, upon an August evening of 1831, the second piece was about to commence, that perspiring crowd—much more jealous of their "rights" than is an audience of to-day—declined to let the play proceed. Farrell came forward, and desired to know the cause of the uproar. A voice shouted: "Why doesn't Payne do his duty, why don't he come forward and dance?—his name is in the bill?" Swiftly came the retort courteous: "Why, ladies and gentlemen? Because it is our constant study to give you pleasure not pain."[1] The performance was successfully concluded.

As an actor, Farrell, who, with Freer, frequently played the romantic leads, was one of the blatant, robustious type popular at such theatres in those days. A contemporary critic wrote of him, at this time: "His action was, as usual, too redundent, and his tone too boisterous by half. These are the rocks upon which this actor dashes, night after night."

When one remembers what the spectators, as well as the actors, had to put up with, one is not surprised that the house was sometimes fractious. In February 1832, for example—six weeks after Fanny Clifton's first performance at the Pavilion—there is a fiasco with the drama of "Brutus," otherwise "Julius Cæsar," upon the noblest Roman being played that night by "a tradesman from Gosport," one Woolgar,

who could neither look well, act well, nor speak well. When Brutus exclaimed "Hear that dreadful peal of thunder?" we heard only the rain box, with the pleasing accompaniment of the prompter's

[1] Payne's name was in the bill for the interlude, not for the third piece.

voice, squeaking like a tom-tit on the dome of Saint Paul's, "that he was not engaged to play thunder—that he was not the thunderer, and damn his eyes if he would thunder."

When, on January 9, 1832, Miss Fanny Clifton made her first appearance as "Zephyrina," she was hindered, no doubt, by two of Mr. Woolgar's disabilities—she could neither act well nor speak well. Good looks and high spirits alone had won her a line to herself upon the bills. Of her performance in "The Man in the Iron Mask"[1] a critic writes: "Mdlle. Aubry was given to Miss Fanny Clifton, 'a pretty piece of uninteresting matter' with just enough ability to speak her lines, and no more." One member of the cast, nevertheless, was already beginning to find her a matter of interest, as we shall soon see.

That same evening she played "Faith Gough" in "The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish," which effort in alliteration—as the play-bill hastens to explain—"is the title of an American drama founded partly on Cooper's celebrated novel of *The Borderers*. Wish-ton-Wish is an Indian valley, and the Wept alludes to the lamentable fate of the heroine, "Hope Gough," aged fifteen, and played by Mdlle. Céleste.

During, or after, Easter, the theatre was remodelled and decorated, and the ceiling painted from a design by Leitch. On April 23 the débutante played "Fair Star," in the then popular romance, "Cherry and Fair Star," of which the principal attraction consisted "in the beauty of the scenery, and the extent and novel working of the machinery."

To the girl herself the principal attraction may have been Edward Stirling,[2] who played "Charles," upon that occasion, and whom she now meets, it seems, for the first time during this spring of 1832. He has been in the Pavilion bills not long before, on Easter Monday, April 4, 1831, whence

[1] January 30, 1832.

[2] Edward Lambert (Stirling) was born at Thame, Oxfordshire, in 1809, and made his first appearance at the Pavilion, under Cooke and Campbell, in 1828. He then went to Richmond under Klanert, who was at that time in want of "a young gentleman to look well and play the light comedy and some of the amiable assassins." When Klanert closed down, Stirling went to Windsor under Penley, then to Croydon and Gravesend, under Billy Hall. Later he was at Dundee under Bass, playing seconds to Edmund Kean, Vandenhoff, and other stars, before returning to the Pavilion. He became an adroit adapter of plays, a sound actor of character, and ultimately manager of Drury Lane Theatre, and author of *Old Drury Lane*.

he had come from Hastings theatre, to play in Douglas Jerrold's drama, "Martha Willis," and "The Man of the Black Forest," by Howard Payne. He disappeared from the Pavilion bills soon after, to reappear in "Cherry and Fair Star," and to remain with Fanny Clifton in the company, until they leave it, as man and wife. Launched already upon a successful career, she was about to compromise her chances of happiness by an unsuccessful, a disastrous marriage.

Into the details of her last performances at the Pavilion, I have not time to go; and must refer the reader to the chronological list of Mrs. Stirling's parts in the Appendix. I will mention only her attempt as "Bella" in "The Wreck Ashore," because a contemporary criticism upon it is interesting, as showing how limited, as yet, was the young actress's technique:

"Bella," writes the press-man, "was assigned to Miss F. Clifton, a very clever girl in her own line, but without the least pretensions to sustain such a character [1]—it was the most abortive attempt at the Fanny Kelly style ever exhibited. We sympathize equally with the lady, the *dramatis personæ* and the audience on the occasion; and must observe that the managers are wanting in their duty to the public, when they fill up characters with individuals of whose incompetency they must be aware, and such conduct is less pardonable when they have an efficient representative at their command. Miss Macarthy ought to have played the part."

Miss Macarthy was then the leading lady at the Pavilion [2]; and there is probably some personal bias in the quoted critique. Nevertheless, when all excuses are made, who can doubt that Fanny Clifton, in those early days, was an artisan working for her living, rather than an artist working for her art. Neither her ambitions nor her ideals are as yet awakened. The next stage of her career was to beget both.

[1] Stirling at this time was equally crude. "The Walter Barnard of Stirling was an imperfect performance—it was anything but an effective representation of a *young Essex Farmer*."

[2] Miss Macarthy went on later to the Coburg—i.e. the Old Vic. The Pavilion continued to present English plays until after 1900, when, as the Jewish community of Whitechapel increased in numbers and wealth, occasional Jewish Saturday matinées were organized. These were uniformly successful, and by 1909 the Pavilion had become a Yiddish theatre. It was from the Pavilion that Mr. J. B. Fagan brought Mr. Maurice Moscovitch to the Court. The theatre in which Fanny Clifton played was burned down in 1856, when the existing building was erected.

CHAPTER II

THE PROVINCES AND THE ADELPHI
1832–37

To Manchester with Stirling—Hard times—First success at Birmingham—Awakening of artistic consciousness, and of ambition—Engaged by Bond at the Adelphi—"The Ghost Story" and "Luke Somerton"—"Rienzi," a typical Adelphi spectacle of the time—Decadence of the drama—Bunn's methods at Drury Lane—Macready and Bunn—Mrs. Stirling tours, and returns to Adelphi—Drunkenness on the stage—The value of experience to a player—"A Flight to America," with "Jim Crow"—She makes a hit as "Sally Snow."

Before I quitted the Pavilion I found a better half in Fanny Clifton. We married at once; started for Liverpool with Davidge,[1] at the Amphitheatre; London Company, Watkin Burroughs stage manager; Batty furnished horses and his equestrian troupe. Burroughs resigned, and I accepted the management.[2]

But there was a hard struggle before them. Stirling thus continues the story, in his staccato style:

Queen's Theatre, Manchester.—Henry Beverly's direction. Myself and wife were engaged to lead the business; this proved very bad—salaries stopped, no resources. What was to be done? It occurred to me to try my hand at writing a piece for a benefit.[3]

So Edward Stirling, in addition to his capacities as actor, manager, and husband, became dramatic author too, and that of the most prolific kind; for, as he phrased it. "quantity rather than quality was the order of the day." I fancy that it remained the order of too many of Stirling's days.

As for the acting of the young couple, here again we may suppose that quantity supplanted quality, but, to

[1] Davidge's speculation in management at Liverpool was a very bad one, and ended in financial disaster. His connection with the Coburg came to an end in 1834.

[2] Stirling's *Old Drury Lane*, i. 75. [3] *Ibid.*

the woman, already the higher outlook is coming. From Manchester, it seems, she went to Birmingham,[1] and there, for the first time, began really to win, and to enjoy, success. Once more the sympathetic writer in *Tallis's Magazine* throws light upon the darkness, in lines that, though involved and weighted by the pompous mannerism of the time, have a pretty touch of intimacy, beauty, and truth:

> Here (at Birmingham) the new performer felt that she began to be valued. Her benefits were well patronized. A consciousness of power, to which she was previously a comparative stranger, awakened within her, and gradually became familiar to her opening intelligence. Delivered from the merely domestic and melodramatic, she had now to give utterance to the thought of beauty in words of music, and perception of the poetic dawned more and more on her awakened spirit. For the first time she learned that acting was an art, and that there was more in it than the mere mimicry of manner and emotion. There was character to be conceived, and passion to be illustrated—pleasure to be excited to temper pain, and the illusions of taste to be magically exhibited.
>
> Thus it was that a genius originally ignorant of its destiny, received from the attempt and practise of an art, a still increasing development, whose very existence otherwise might never have been suspected. Still, however, there was more progress than feeling. She took more and more delight in acting, because of acquired facility; and continued to improve, because she still continued unreluctantly to work; but the ambition to excel had not yet been conceived, or the expectation formed, that the high places in her profession were within her reach. She had yet to rise to this perception; other influences were needed to stimulate exertion and desire. She had yet to struggle on darkly before she attained to these.

Already good reports concerning her had reached London. At the close of 1835, Bond, then manager of the Adelphi, sent for Fanny Clifton. She returned to London, with her husband, and was promptly engaged to make her first appearance at the West End. At that theatre, on January 1836, at the age of twenty-three, Fanny Stirling, following Mrs. Nisbett, played "Biddy Nutts," in the then well-known melodrama "A Dream at Sea," by that prolific playwright, the low comedian, Buckstone. She seems to have suc-

[1] I suppose that her husband accompanied her, because—according to *Actors by Daylight*, December 8, 1836—it was at Birmingham, under Armitsead, that Stirling wrote and produced one of his earliest successful plays, "Sadak and Kalisrade."

ceeded from the start, winning at once the good-will of a West London audience, though, to judge by the following comment, she did not impress a consciousness of her serious value at once upon all the critics:

> Mrs. Stirling possesses in an eminent degree every requisite for a low comedy performer; she uses all with admirable tact and discretion, and she is withal a very pretty woman.

Though, no doubt, often exasperating, by its futility, to an actress of her keen intelligence, the type of play favoured by the Adelphi management must have given her some valuable experience. Here is a sample. On January 3, in the company of Buckstone, O. Smith, Younge, and Hemming, she plays, as "Catherine Graham," in an absurd and totally inexplicable production, "The Ghost Story," wherein a smuggler with a sheet, a turnip, and a candle, concocts a grimly spectre, for the terrorizing of intruders to his haunt. Evidently she tried her hardest; for although Fanny Stirling had been but three days before the London critics, *The Times*[1] man, already discerning ability, is moved to write thus:

> Of Mrs. Stirling, who is a recent acquisition, it is not too much to speak in terms of high encomium; she is a natural actress, and imparts even to a character which never existed in nature an appearance of actual existence and life. It is to be regretted that her talents are not better employed than in supporting a character like that in which she appeared last night. It is quite clear she is capable of much better things, and it would be the interest, as well as the duty, of the management to give her a fair chance of success in her profession.

The endeavour to give "an appearance of actual existence and life" to characters owing no such qualities to their author, was often, thenceforth, a part of Mrs. Stirling's duty.

Her next task gives us an illuminating example of Adelphi methods under the management of Yates. The play was "Luke Somerton," a production heralded by a puff preliminary, typical of the time, announcing upon the play-bill, "a Grand New Melodrama with scenic effects and machinery

[1] January 7, 1836.

never yet attempted in this building, etc." It proved to be a piece of the kind that had been done frequently at the Coburg, under Davidge's management, full of "pageants and dramatic effects," including blue flames and a "corpse light" at Peel castle, heralding death. "Luke Somerton," played by O. Smith, was a later "Paul Jones," who, on the way to execution, shoots himself, at the very moment when his daughter "Louisa," played by Mrs. Stirling, rushes on to announce his pardon.

Some of these melodramas succeeded, and others failed; but what most annoyed the better class of playgoer, at this time, was the fact that, whether applauded on the first night, or incontinently damned, the drama was announced in next morning's advertisments, as having been "received with unbounded applause by a most brilliant and crowded audience."

To Macready, then touring in the West of England, belongs much of the credit for having been the first of the managers to put an end, once for all, to the puff mendacious. This is another of the many debts our stage owes to him.

On February 13 the curtain rose at the Adelphi upon a production, concerning which—though Mrs. Stirling played only a minor part in it—I shall say something, in further illustration of theatrical methods of those days. The drama in question was "Rienzi, the Last of the Tribunes," adapted by Buckstone from Bulwer's novel so entitled. Slap-dash was the playwright's method. From the formal and stately commonplaces of the novel he borrowed portions of dialogue, cut them up into lengths, sandwiched them with interpolations of his own, neither formal nor stately, and duly served them to their respective speakers. Mrs. Stirling's share did not amount to much, but what she had probably amused her, though she was not, I suppose, heroine enough to approach, without flinching, the "live" horses, that nearly kicked off their lady riders, nor archæologist enough to be amused by the medley of costumes—including armour of the Greek, Roman, and mediæval periods—and dresses of Italy, Sicily, Savoy, and other countries all variously and incoherently mingled.[1]

[1] *The Times*, February 4, 1836.

The critic of the *Sunday Times*, after a satirical allusion to the chivalric character of the Adelphi entertainments, continued:

> To Elton is assigned the part of "Rienzi," and, amidst the strange confusion, he possesses a sufficient portion of dignity to make us regard "The Last of the Tribunes" with respect. Buckstone, however, as a small tailor, and O. Smith, as a huge blacksmith, are the first creatures in our imagination. They do not precisely give us any idea of Roman manners . . . but they present us with a sketch of "plebeians and their politics," as the bills say, which is infinitely ludicrous. . . . Mrs. Honey appears as a page in a very superb tunic of blue velvet and gold, and yellow silk stockings, and her countenance is most appropriately beautified by a pair of moustachios, a species of ornament not used by the other Romans.
>
> In regard to the costumes generally, we imagine that, if one of the gentlemen of Rome were to rise from the dead, he would be exceedingly puzzled to recognize his own countrymen.

Thus, amid falling ruins, and the glare of red fire, the curtain dropped, for ever, upon "Rienzi," the general comment of the town being, that London "was saturated with spectacle."

"Victorine, or I'll sleep on It," which followed the Roman play, gave Mrs. Stirling an opportunity to take up one of Mrs. Yates's favourite parts. Incidentally, the scenes at its production reveal again the disorderliness of theatrical audiences of the early nineteenth century. The authorities received many complaints of gross acts of misconduct and brutality at the pit doors, and one is inclined to think that London managers might well have imitated their brethren in Paris, by posting sentinels among the spectators, to maintain order.

On March 26 the Adelphi closed, when Gallot—representing Yates and Gladstanes, the lessees—made the customary farewell speech. Mrs. Stirling occupied herself, during part of the summer, with a provincial tour, in the course of which she revisited Birmingham—where she increased her previous good reputation—and several towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire.

During the theatrical holiday, that section of the press interested in stage matters took occasion to bewail the existing state of affairs.

The regular drama [wrote the *Sunday Times*][1] has nearly passed from our stage—tragedy, and genuine comedy, have given way to glaring spectacle, to operatic or melodramatic pieces imported from the continent, and stuffed with the morbid sensibility of Scribe, or the grotesque romance of Victor Hugo.

At the bottom of much of the prevailing discontent in the theatrical world were the methods of Bunn, at Drury Lane. This famous, or infamous, manager, after "cornering" many leading actors of the day—such as Macready, Harley, Farren, Vandenhoff, Warde, and Ellen Tree—and having promised the best national drama, both tragedy and comedy—proceeded to redeem those promises by putting on such pieces as "The Seige of La Rochelle," and "The Jewess." More and more bitter grew the actors' discontent, more and more severe the press comments. The *New Monthly* printed the following, aimed at Bunn:

The lessees' sayings and doings all tend consistently to one point —all tend to lower public taste, to taint public morals, to lessen public amusement, to subvert the stage, to degrade the actor, to destroy the very profession; to dishonour the drama, to repress the imagination, to dry up the springs of human sympathy; to make the existing generation scoff, where their fathers admired and reverenced; and to render a noble and humanizing art a mere convenience for ignorant pretension, licensed intrigue, and sordid speculation.

Macready's now historic assault upon Bunn had brought the controversy to a climax. On April 29, that noble-hearted, though irascible tragedian, exasperated beyond endurance, had entered the manager's office, and "dug his fist"[2] well into the offender. Bunn had brought an action, in which Macready, deeply repentant—and the object of much popular sympathy—had allowed judgment to go by default.[3] That incident, long remembered, somewhat cleared the air.

It was to such subjects of London theatrical gossip that Mrs. Stirling returned from the provinces, for the reopening of the Adelphi, on September 29. With C. Pope, from

[1] September 4, 1836.

[2] June 8, 1836. The last straw was Bunn's intimation to Macready that he had announced "Richard III" without the last act. Bunn knew that it was Macready's best act, and Macready knew that he knew.

[3] *Macready's Diary*, ii. 22.

Leamington, she was engaged to supply the places of Mrs. Honey and Mrs. Keeley—other members of the company being Mrs. Yates, John Reeve, Buckstone and Hemming. She did little, at first, but I have noted an appearance in "The Doom of Marana," an adaptation of Dumas's "La Chute d'une Ange"—then in great repute among Parisians—wherein O. Smith enacted "The Spirit of Evil," a line of business in which he had no rival. When the young actress's opportunity did come, it was accompanied by one of those stage misadventures so frequent during Yates's management of the Adelphi.

The play was "Rosine, or am I a Princess?" All went smoothly, until it became apparent that the representative of the Marquis of Gottenburg, incapable of repeating what the author had set down for him, was substituting his own improvisations, described by *The Times* critic as "balderdash and slang." These impromptus, of course, paralysed the other performers, and were so much resented by the audience that manager Yates had to come forward, with a promise that the part should be "word-perfect on the morrow."

Drunkenness, in those days, was much too common among actors. John Coleman, in his memoir of Phelps,[1] has told us how often the tragedian would deplore the evil.

> Many a man of ability went headlong to the devil, thinking it a sign of genius to follow the pernicious example of Cooke and Kean, who not only ruined their own lives but the lives of many others.

Such incidents, however, disconcerting though they be at the moment, can be turned to account by those who are wise enough to make use of them. They inculcate self-possession and restraint, and foster an unconquerable determination to succeed, in spite of difficulties and drawbacks. In Paris, not long since, Etienne Bourdelle, the sculptor, said to the writer: "Pour l'art de demain il nous faudra de longues initiations." This is true, not of his great art alone, but of all art. The battle against drunkenness was a part of those initiations.

Mrs. Stirling's own initiatory experiences multiplied

[1] *Phelps' Memoirs*, p. 79.

fast. Her next was "A Flight to America," a title which, in these days, has a modern ring, though there was nothing particularly novel about the entertainment, described on the play-bills as "a new musical, characteristic olla-podrical extravaganza." It had been written by Leman Rede, for the purpose of introducing, or rather of "booming," Rice, the original "Jim Crow"—hic niger est—

They may talk about philosophy
But I'm prepared to show
'Tis all comprised in wheel about
And jump Jim Crow.
Turn about and wheel about, and dance just so;
Turn about and wheel about, and jump Jim Crow.

This catchy jingle, by Buckstone, took the fancy of the town, and was heard everywhere; for Crow's performance was very clever, of its kind. "The shuffling gait, the strange whistle, the more strange laugh could never have been invented by Mr. Rice."[1]

As for Mrs. Stirling, putting aside what dawning aspiration she may have had towards higher class work, she blacked her pretty face, made love to, and was courted by, "Jim Crow," danced, sang negro and patter songs, in the then equivalent for rag-time, and did all these things with a spirit and vivacity that won much admiration, and kept the house in a roar of laughter from beginning to end. "Sally Snow," in fact, was one of Mrs. Stirling's early hits.

Her personation is inimitable, and we doubt if there be any actress now in London who can furnish so original a portrait of the negro character.

Stirling Coyne, afterwards Secretary to the Dramatic Authors Society, was then writing a farce, "Humours of an Election," which was produced at the Adelphi on January 9, 1837, when John Reeve imitated O'Connor very badly, and Mrs. Stirling, in the part of "Lucy Contest," gave early indication of her chief dramatic fault—that grew as years went by—namely, a tendency to exaggeration.

[1] *Examiner*, November 20, 1836.

This actress [wrote a contemporary critic] is a lady of considerable talent, who takes great pains with her parts, but she is at times rather given to over-act, and we think if she played the country girl in a style rather more subdued, it would be to the advantage of the character.

A month later she played once more with Rice, in "The Peacock and the Crow," by Parry, a piece that was thoroughly hissed, and was noteworthy only for the fact, that one of her stage companions was the eccentric Tate Wilkinson, author of those rambling, discursive memoirs, that, loosely written though they be, throw much light upon stage conditions of the day.

February brought to the young actress some "comic business" in a spectacle "Hussan Pacha"; and, with "Lady Randolph" in "Douglas"—a poor burlesque by Leman Rede, in which she "wept and watered her geraniums with all the lackadaisical dignity of an approved heroine of romance"—Mrs. Stirling's engagement at the Adelphi came to an end.

CHAPTER III

NEW STRAND AND ST. JAMES'S
1837–38

First appearances at the New Strand—Her versatility discovered—Parts written to exploit it—Engaged by Braham at St. James's—Overcoming authors' deficiencies—"Angéline" and "'Tis She"—A stage dilemma—Bad plays and dull audiences—Goes to Garrick Theatre, Whitechapel—Crisis in her career—Sympathetic press criticism—Mrs. Stirling withdraws from the stage—Condition of the theatre in London—Mrs. Stirling "Gladstone's first love"—Knowles and Bulwer—Macready at Covent Garden—The "Bunn House"—Plight of Drury Lane—Mme. Vestris takes Covent Garden—Beginnings of drawing-room comedy—Incompetent authors and players—The Penny Theatre and the Saloon.

Mrs. Stirling's work at the Adelphi had been restricted, in general, to parts that rose little above low comedy or the crudest melodrama. During the remainder of 1837 she was to reveal to the public, to the critics, and perhaps to herself, a greater versatility, and a capacity to advance in her profession.

The character [1] in which she made her first appearance at the New Strand gave her small opportunity, except to show animation in a quarrel scene; but the rôle that followed —"Mrs. Mountjoy" in "The Golden Calf," another play by the prolific Jerrold—marks a stage, as being one of the first performances in which she blended skilfully humour with pathos.[2] Mrs. Stirling came out of the ordeal with much credit; the breadth of her talent gained recognition, and her manager begins at once to produce plays written with the sole object of exploiting her cleverness.

"Batchelor's Buttons," for instance—the farce which terminated, for that year, her engagement at the New Strand —was specially written, by her husband, to enable her to

[1] "Fanny Flittermouse" in "The Gallantie Showman," by Douglas Jerrold, March 27, 1837.

[2] *Sunday Times*, April 30, 1837.

show her versatility. In it she disported herself as a romping school-girl, a jockey, a sportsman, and a chattering maid-of-all-work. As the "sport"—"all blood and no bone"—she threw into the part, according to the *Idler*, a sprightliness and a "je ne-sais-quoi," original as it was delightful. Concerning her two previous performances the same critic had let himself go.

The acting of Mrs. Stirling throughout this piece is perfection. Her by-play too is admirable; she never lets a single point escape her observation. In the popular burletta of "Venus in Arms" she shines with, if possible, greater lustre. What a handsome officer she makes! how genteel her bearing! how amiable her little failings! how enchanting the symmetry of her person.

Here evidently was an ingenuous critic hard hit!

Her willingness, at twenty-four years old, already, on occasion, outran her physical strength. The summer found her severely ill, though by August she was well enough for Braham [1] to engage her for the comedy lead at the St. James's, where she made her first appearance, on September 29, as "Amelia," in "The Young Widow." This was followed, in October—I am omitting minor performances—by "Hélöise de Mirancourt," in "Natural Magic," an immoral and incongruous production, written solely for the purpose of allowing Mrs. Stirling to appear first as an old countess, and then as an artless girl of eighteen. Only her spirited acting saved the piece from utter damnation on the first night. The curtain fell amid mingled hisses and applause, and *The Times* critic, on the following day, complained that Mrs. Stirling, in her effort to get contrast, had overdone her part, and, as the old woman, had "faltered and croaked to a most unpleasant degree."

"The Miller's Maid" pointed again to her gradual transition from the romps, hoydens, and pert waiting-maids

[1] Braham had made his first London appearance at the Royalty in 1787, with a song, "The Tired Soldier." He played in almost every town in England, and many abroad, and was generally held to be the best tenor singer, and the worst actor, in Europe. Time, as it impaired his voice, improved his acting. In a cathedral he was always magnificent; on the stage could occasionally be so. His voice—full tenor, with light baritone quality in lower tones—was of extraordinary compass, power, flexibility, and sweetness.

of burletta, to genuine domestic drama; and "Angéline" [1] though in itself nothing at all, instanced her growing power to overcome an author's deficiencies, and to win a minor triumph of personality. One writer, at least, saw in her performance "hope that with a little practice she will become as successful in delineating pathos and deep feeling, as she now is eminent in the gayer walks of farce and comedy."[2] *The Times* [3] wrote as follows:

> A very meagre little burletta last night met with great success, on account of the excellent acting of Mrs. Stirling. Plot there was none; incident there was none; in the dialogue there was nothing; and yet by the mere telling of a pathetic tale, and on the whole by very judicious performance, Mrs. Stirling contrived to render the piece interesting. We have never seen this lady to such advantage; in comic parts she is often unpleasantly vivacious, and bordering on caricature; her forte is evidently the domestic serious.

These successes, backed by his leading lady's willingness, apparently led Braham to suppose that she could do anything; for he now proceeds to cast her as an Italian brigand, in the name part of "Pascal Bruno," a melodrama from Hook's version of Dumas. Why the rôle of a weather-hardened hero, who makes the rock his bed, and the sky his counterpane—the sort of thing that Wallack could then have done to perfection—was entrusted to a pretty and fragile young woman of twenty-four, only Braham himself knew. The result, of course, was complete failure. "Mrs. Stirling looked like a toy brigand, and the fighting scene was laughably absurd." [4]

This was bad enough; but worse was to come. On February 6, 1838, the unhappy lady was induced to play the lead in another miserable farrago of rubbish, "'Tis She, or Maid, Wife, and Widow," in which Wright, the low comedian, gave an offensive imitation of Meadows, and rendered himself merely ridiculous. According to one critic, the only commendable incident in the play was the

[1] November 27, 1837. The part turned upon the sorrows of a French girl, whose lover, supposed dead in battle, returns just in time to save her.
[2] *Sunday Times*, December 3, 1837.
[3] November 28, 1837.
[4] *Sunday Times*, December 31, 1837.

swiftness with which Mrs. Stirling changed her dresses; but this need for haste nearly brought about a fiasco on the first night, when "She," after appearing as the maid, went straight into widow's weeds, and got her cue for "Wife" before the mistake was discovered. Here was a dilemma indeed! but Webster proved equal to the occasion. He walked straight on, and while the hustled heroine was transferring herself back to the married state, tackled the only other occupant of the stage—one Gardener, who was playing a waiter—and held him in an improvised humorous conversation, so cleverly done that, when Mrs. Stirling, at last, came on, in wifely costume, two-thirds of the audience were unaware that there had been any departure from the book. It was a fine example of what experience and self-possession can do upon the stage.

St. James's Theatre, in this year of grace, 1838, had acquired a reputation, well deserved, for producing dramas destitute of plot, character, or dialogue, of which "'Tis She" was the most flagrant example. We may be certain, therefore, that, despite the encouragement afforded to her by the *Examiner*[1]—"Mrs. Stirling actually wakes up the dullest of all dull audiences that nightly assemble here[2]—a feat that we had considered a moral impossibility"—the young actress must often have returned at night to her house in the Adelphi,[3] thoroughly dissatisfied, and in grievous doubt as to what her future course should be. Neither stage career, nor home life, was fulfilling her heart's desire.

This uncertainty in her own mind, as to her true bent, was reflected in the press. The *Sunday Times*, for example, reviewing the St. James's company, wrote of its leading lady:

Her forte appears to be in serious drama, for which her person is admirably adapted; her versatility is great, and she is too good an actress to fail in anything. Her fault is to do too much, a fault she should amend speedily, for it is one likely to grow upon her.

[1] November 27, 1837.
[2] On February 16, 1838, the Duke of Cambridge saw her in "The Black Domino," and expressed himself as highly delighted.
[3] She was then living at No. 13 John Street, Adelphi.

During that same month, March 1838, she left the St. James's and played for a few weeks—mostly in revivals—at the Garrick Theatre, Leman Street, Whitechapel, acting "'Tis She," for her own benefit, on March 20, when O. Smith, Hammond, and other popular favourites appeared for her. This short season was no great success, for the Garrick had fallen upon evil days, being unable to withstand the competition of two other rival houses, the Pavilion, and the "City," or "Norton Folgate." Her fortunes were going from bad to worse.

That Mrs. Stirling, at this period of her life, first doubted her wisdom in seeking a stage career, seems very probable. Not that she considered herself a complete failure. Her difficulties, rather, were begotten of disillusionment, uncertainty of direction, and the uncontrolled impulses of her own character. Well intentioned, but without knowledge of the world, with more intolerance than patience in her disposition, and possessing no wise counsellor to whom she might turn for guidance, every circumstance, in those days, seemed to be conspiring to thwart her. Her very enthusiasm, her intense desire to please, even the extraordinary versatility, that swung her always between tragedy and comedy—all these virtues the untowardness of the time made vices. In common with the futility of her stage-work, in those days, they clouded her judgment, and obscured the goal at which she must aim.

Several contemporary writers are sympathetically conscious of the situation. In *Actors by Daylight*,[1] for example, we read:

> As an actress, we fear, she now stands in a dangerous position. It is her *infirmity* to possess an overflow of animal spirits, and a great tendency to over-act every part entrusted to her care, caused by her own desire to please. She should strive to dispossess herself of this, for, if persisted in, it may prove fatal to her reputation. Her serious and comic capabilities are so nicely balanced that we cannot ascribe a vast superiority to either. Were she to turn her attention to the legitimate comedy, she would, in our opinion, acquire a chaster and more natural style, which would render her the most entertaining actress on the stage. At present she is content to enjoy a transitory fame that will leave no trace to tell that such an actress ever lived.

[1] March 24, 1838.

On the other hand, in "Rosalind," "Violente," and other parts she would have no equal, and at the same time increase her income, and pass her name to posterity with those of Clive, Gibbs, Jordan, etc.

Those words contain the truth of the matter: their advice was sound; and they voice again the same danger that the Editor of the *Dramatic Magazine* had warned her against, in June of the year before.

As an actress Mrs. Stirling is at all times pleasing and vivacious, and would, by a rigid schooling, and the temperate exercise of the intellect she possesses, achieve a steady course, half-way between a Jordan and an Orger, without the danger of falling either into Scylla or Charybdis. Her greatest faults are impatience, and an over-anxiety to please her audience, by which she falls sometimes short of grace, and sometimes of ideality. These errors have occasionally placed her in a wrong position with an *injudicious* auditory, who have attributed them to coarseness, or a want of refinement. Such, however, is not the case, as in her disposition and ordinary pursuits she is directly the reverse of both. Hitherto her best performances have been "Victorine" and "Grace Huntley" in the serious; "The Georgian" in "The Arab's Leap"; "The Petticoat Colonel," and "Sally Snow" in "The Flight to America."

Whether these criticisms met her eye, and influenced her decision, I do not know. Probably they did; and the sequel is that in the *Sunday Times*, of June 24, appeared an announcement to the effect that "Mr. Edward Stirling, the actress's husband, having, it is said, procured a government situation, has withdrawn her altogether from the public stage."[1] So she vanishes for a time from the public gaze, but not from the hearts of many who had seen her. It was to this period that W. E. Gladstone[2] referred when—in 1884—while lunching with Miss Mary Anderson during the run of "Romeo and Juliet" at the Lyceum, he said to her: "You will be seeing Fanny Stirling to-night. Please tell her from me that she was my first love. No harm to tell her so now."

There, in temporary retirement, we will leave her, while

[1] The couple separated, I think, about this time. They remained for years on terms more or less friendly; but they lived together no more.

[2] W. E. Gladstone, born December 29, 1809, was then nearly thirty. He married in 1839.

we glance again, for a moment, at the general condition of affairs theatrical in London.

These were not particularly exhilarating. Of the men then writing for the stage, two—Sheridan Knowles and Edward Bulwer—stood high above all others, with Knowles easily first. His more flexible, franker, and heartier style, his warmth and generosity of manner, both in light and serious work, gave him an immense advantage over his rival, who was altogether of the classic school in his stiff, pompous, and cold artificiality. Both men were now at the height of their performance. Knowles, some eighteen months before, had produced, at the Haymarket, with great success, his clever comedy, "The Love Chase," in which Mrs. Glover and Mrs. Nisbett, the two foremost comédiennes of the day, had played "The Widow" and "Constance." On February 24, 1838, the name of Edward Lytton Bulwer was first announced, in the Covent Garden play-bills, as the author of "The Lady of Lyons"—Macready, then managing Covent Garden, being the first representative of "Claude Melnotte," "The Adventurer,"[1] classed by Hollingshead—with the same author's "Evelyn" in "Money"—as the two champion cads of dramatic literature, which, on the whole, they were not.

Macready, nevertheless, was doing good work at Covent Garden, by encouraging the best playwrights we had, and by reviving and re-establishing our national drama. The abolition of claques, the issue of truthful play-bills, and insistence upon other much-needed reforms, were all acts of good example to managers in general, and to his old opponent, Bunn, in particular, under whose direction the other patent theatre, Drury Lane, was drifting fast on to the rocks. Learning nothing from Macready's successes, nor from his own failures, he continued to anger the more honest section of the public by putting on rubbish, and by printing lying puffs concerning unworthy shows.

More and more savage became the comments of the press. The *Examiner* had written:[2]

[1] Bulwer suggested this title, but Macready would not have it. *Macready's Diary*, ii. 101, 102.

[2] November 27, 1837.

"The *wonder of wonders* turned out to be a gross cheat —a fraud too miserable and disgusting to escape exposure, even in the 'Bunn House.'" The *Sunday Times* took to writing of the national theatre as the "National Nuisance." Drury Lane, in fact, was fast becoming a mere shilling show, and haunt of the riff-raff—a joke, when it was not a scandal. The value of the shares had dropped almost to nothing, when, on April 25, 1839, that master of magniloquent and florid rhetoric, the famous auctioneer, George Robins, offered for sale three lots, each consisting of five £100 shares in the theatre, and a life-admission, which latter, as Robins remarked, with unintentional irony, "could be appropriated to a child."

The first lot was knocked down "to a family-looking gentleman," for thirty-five guineas; the other two went for thirty guineas each. At a meeting of the Drury Lane shareholders, held on July 24, it was announced that the debts were £17,706, and the amounts on the credit side, to meet them, £17,704, of which £5,000 were due from a Captain Polhill, and £12,999 from Mr. Bunn. That sum, we suppose, was not forthcoming, and Bunn, unlamented, soon after left Drury Lane, to undertake the mismanagement of St. James's!

On July 16, 1839, Macready terminated his season at Covent Garden, amid volleys of applause, that, with the exception of John Kemble's farewell, and Kean's return from America, had not been equalled, for spontaneity and enthusiasm, within the memory of living man.[1] The theatre was at once transferred to Mme. Vestris (Mrs. Charles Mathews), who, with her husband, had been for some years at the Olympic. This change to Covent Garden soon brought financial disaster upon them both.

These few notes, concerning the fortunes of the two principal houses at this time, will give some idea of the chaotic state of affairs at the top. In the middle—among

[1] "When I had changed my dress I went before the curtain, and amidst shoutings and wavings of hats and handkerchiefs by the whole audience standing up, the stage was literally covered with wreaths, bouquets, and bunches of laurel." *Macready's Diary*, ii. 147.

"A hundred garlands were whirled at his feet." *Sunday Times*, July 21, 1839.

what had been called, hitherto, "the minor theatres"—things were not very much better. Managers were everywhere feeling their way, and only at the Olympic, perhaps, had a distinct advance been made. There Charles Mathews, a newcomer, hampered by no respect at all, either for dramatic conventions or for theatrical tradition, had begun to create a new form of comedy—as Planché describes it—which, in some sort, held the mirror up to a nature that came between "the utter inanity of the walking gentleman, and the artificial exuberance of the first light comedian." There, too, under Mme. Vestris, had been introduced another reform, that soon was to spread to many theatres. Stage drawing-rooms were realistically fitted up, to resemble what they purported to be.

Realistic settings have never, we suppose, wrought much good to the drama; but this small beginning of a truer realism is worth noting, because it helped to make possible, and so, in measure, led up to, the beginning of drawing-room comedy, as we understand it to-day. By the help of such primitive aids, we reached the cup-and-saucer drama, of the Robertson kind, and, through that, the fully developed comedy of the eighties and after.

In the main, however, the stage of the later thirties remained radically crude and superficial. Charlatans, both literary and histrionic, obtained a hearing not easily accounted for, except on the admission that the average manager of the day did not know his business. The contemporary press gives some amusing examples of strange happenings. At the Haymarket, in December 1837, was produced a domestic drama, by one Frederic Lawrence, concerning which the *Examiner*[1] comments:

> It caused roars of laughter and great amusement, though not the sort of amusement the author had in mind—if he had such a thing as a mind about him, which we rather doubt. Of all the insults ever offered to the understanding of an audience, this is the greatest. The production of such wretched, despicable trash is disgraceful to Mr. Webster, and most unworthy treatment of the clever actors and actresses who are compelled to utter the mawkish absurdities set

[1] *Examiner*, December 17, 1837. John Forster had been appointed chief critic of the *Examiner* in 1833. He was its editor from 1847 until the end of 1855, or early 1856.

down for them. "What's in a name?" observes Mr. Frederic Lawrence indignantly. "Everything. Nothing can be done without one." We know one, at all events, by which nothing will ever be done, and that is the name of Mr. Frederic Lawrence.

There were also aspiring actors about, who could match even the authors in incompetence. At Drury Lane, on December 2, 1838, was given a performance of "Romeo and Juliet," which, of its kind, has never been repeated upon the London stage. The *Examiner*, this time, is too mirthful to storm.

> We can no more find it in our heart to be angry with Maddocks (the "Romeo") than could his audience of Tuesday. Perhaps there never was such an assemblage of merry faces as that which greeted his performance. It was Hogarth's laughing party realized. The house was in a roar. A party of fat gentlemen in the pit cried out repeatedly that it was too much, and one—the fattest among them—implored that Maddocks might be taken away, as he would be the death of him. But the play went on, and boxes, pit, and galleries enjoyed it as one man. . . . None but Maddocks can be Maddocks' parallel.

Violent as were the contrasts then in the upper realms of the drama, the conditions of its under-world were equally strange and unstable. Everywhere to-day we hear complaints of the cinemas, and of their evil influence upon the morals of children. The cinema of 1838 was the "Penny Theatre"—an unlicensed house, largely supported by children of the poorer classes, who commonly obtained the necessary coppers by filching, and selling, objects from the neighbouring shops. Loud rose the clamour of Poplar tradesmen against the proprietors of that "dilapidated barn"—the local play-house—who, to the gross encouragement of petty larceny, were presenting "The Bravo's Bow," or "The Midnight Meeting."

A certain Kingsland Road gaff offered its patrons "Macbeth," acted through in twenty minutes—provided that a raid by the police, at the instigation of the patent theatres, did not bring about an even swifter conclusion. Ratcliffe Highway possessed, by way of play-house, "a deplorable underground hole"; and Clare Market had another such; though the largest of them all was in Newton Street,

Holborn, where business was carried on almost as at a licensed theatre. Tickets could be purchased at the neighbouring shops, and three or four performances nightly gave you a choice between "Rosina," "The Nabob," or "Mabel's Curse," to which, being adult, you might bring your pipe, and a hot potato, to warm you at the Muses' feet. Quite recently, delving into the archives of Messrs. Strahan, of New Cut, I discovered play-bills of "Exhibition Rooms"—as this Newton Street house was named—dated September 1839 (probably), and offering, as *pièce de resistance*, "Selections from a Work entitled, 'The Wild Women of Alsace,' to be followed by 'The Murderer's Haunt.'"

Yet even these gaffs had their uses. Beneath their ugliness lies hid the beauty of a great art. The toad is jewel-mouthed. Within such dens, be it remembered, famous players, like Toole and Robson, first acquired their love for the stage.

One degree only above the gaffs were the "saloons," otherwise the "long rooms" of ancient Elizabethan taverns, now glorified in name, and provided with a stage and scenery. They flourished exceedingly during the thirties, and endured until the Theatres Act, before mentioned, compelled a radical change.

Such, in brief, was theatrical London, now about to welcome Mrs. Stirling back once more to its boards.

CHAPTER IV

LYCEUM, DRURY LANE, AND OLYMPIC

1839–40

Mrs. Stirling returns to the stage—"Lady Mary Montagu" at the Lyceum—Recites a prologue—Penley's failure—She goes to Hammond at Drury Lane—Contemporary pen-pictures of Mrs. Stirling—Appearance and Character—First appearance at Drury Lane, as "Beatrice"—Her failure in the part—Hammond's deficiencies as manager—"Woman's Trials"—"Cupid's Diplomacy"—Takes up Mrs. Glover's part in "The Ladies' Club"—Mrs. Glover—Mrs. Stirling her legitimate successor.

RETIREMENT at twenty-six from an alluring profession, for which one has unusual aptitudes, to a discordant home life, is a change not likely to be permanent. In Mrs. Stirling's case it lasted until the following spring, when she thought better of her too precipitate decision, and, on April 1, 1839, returned to the West End, there to take a prominent part in the reopening of the Lyceum—hitherto known as The English Opera House—under Penley's management.

The play itself—"Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, or Courtship and Matrimony in 1712"—is of little account; but the occasion is interesting, as being one of the earliest instances in which Mrs. Stirling exercised another of her many talents—that of reciter.

There exists, I believe, a stage tradition to the effect that a good reader and reciter is usually a poor actor. Be that as it may, 'tis certain that many modern players, of both sexes, are ineffective speakers, especially of verse. Mrs. Stirling, however, possessed both gifts, as managers were already discovering. On this occasion we find her speaking, before the curtain, "with much taste and spirit," a rhymed prologue, from which—for the light it throws upon her retirement, and upon stage methods of her day, rather than for intrinsic merit—I give some extracts here.

The first of April, well; how very queer,
Of all the days throughout the running year
Our new lessee upon that one should fix,
Which law and custom set aside for tricks.

There follow more lines respecting the lessee, and recent provincial experiences of members of the company, most of whom were now venturing for the first time upon the metropolis. The rhymer continues:

Besides, he's got, to meet theatric strife,
A London pilot, aided by his wife;
It might be better too for all your houses,
If wives could still be managed by their spouses.
Perhaps, good folks, you'll deem it strange that one
Who late proclaimed her drama days were done,
In mimic scene again should court the praise
Which formed her best delight of other days;
Let women's folly, madness, or caprice,
Rise to your minds and bid your wonder cease;
And never for one moment deem it strange
That woman claims her privilege to change.
For my return, if you should ask the cause,
O! 'twas my yearning for your kind applause;
For still I own, with gratitude and pleasure,
Your "handy-work" produced my greatest treasure.
So much for self; and now for our lessee.
On you he trusts; "to be or not to be,"
To-night no foreign singers strain their throats,
And change for English gold their foreign notes;
To blushing belles and to applauding beaux
No foreign dancers here their legs expose,
And they with pas and pirouette can make
At least a guinea every step they take.
No ponderous giant lengthens out our play—
No dwarfish fly on ceiling wends his way;
No prodigies our nightly bills declare;
No classic Crow, nor e'en a Bayadere.
No monkies chatter, and do all they can
To show how very like they are to man;
Yet without brutes in our dramatic corps,
We hope t' indulge the audience with a roar;
Not that of lions which a dread imparts,
But roars of laughter coming from your hearts;
We trust you'll find our English flag unfurling,
Our pieces current, and our actors sterling.[1]

[1] The Bill of Astley's Royal Amphitheatre, for that night, comprised "The Victories of Edward the Black Prince, or The Battle Field," to

The adventures of "Lady Mary" as a foot-pad, holding up her sexagenarian follower upon Hounslow Heath, though carried off with much spirit, are not worth dwelling upon to-day. The interest is in the sequel, affording further evidence of the unscrupulousness of managers of the day, and the levity, or heartlessness, with which some of them would treat players in their employ.

This case of the Lyceum, under Penley, was an example. London was then, as it is to-day, the goal of every provincial actor. He looked to opportunity in the capital, as his chief hope of high attainment in the profession. Penley, a provincial manager of experience and good repute, had induced a number of actors and actresses—among whom were Addison and Creswick—to throw up lucrative engagements at Glasgow, Newcastle, Bath, and other provincial towns, and to accompany him to the Lyceum. They would naturally suppose that he had brought with him the wherewithal to tide his company over any initial failure. In fact, he was merely gambling upon the chance of success. After eleven nights' performance five nights' salary only were paid, and the manager was reduced to the expedient of throwing the stage open to the audience at the end of the second piece, and giving a concert à la Musard. Much distress resulted to the players, who, with the one exception of the leading lady, were unknown in London, and whose provincial posts were already filled.

For Mrs. Stirling it was a disappointing return to public work; and one is not surprised that she seems to have done little during the following summer. In the autumn, however, came a better engagement. She was induced by W. J. Hammond, late manager of the Strand, to follow him to Drury Lane, now vacated by Bunn.[1] Before accompanying her there, let us see how the young actress, now in

be followed by Mr. Van Amburgh in his extraordinary performance with the new trained lions and other animals. In the circle—M. Baptiste Loisset's celebrated Equestrian Company of French and German riders.

At St. James's the bill included "Schreyer's celebrated troupe of monkeys, dogs, etc.," concerning which the *Examiner* wrote: "Our only desire throughout is to see the exhibitor and the monkeys change places. We think we could then enjoy the thing."

[1] The writer in *Tallis's Magazine* states that she signed for three years, in order to get the benefits of the Pensions Fund.

the full bloom of matured youth, appeared to contemporary eyes.

The following passages, more familiar than dignified, reveal something of her personality, and give us a glimpse of the woman's character, and of her inclinations in private life. They are from the *Dramatic Magazine*, June 1837, and *Actors by Daylight*, March 1838, already borrowed from in previous chapters.

In person Mrs. Sterling is about the middle stature, with a figure approaching, from the waist upward, to harmony and fair proportion. Her foot and ankle were fabricated for a larger structure, and do not exactly assimilate with other adjacent beauties. Her teeth are white and regular, and are set within two ruby lips, that even an anchorite might sigh to hear confessions from. Her eyes are small and dark, but vivid in their expression, and sweetly penetrating in their glances. She seldom looks you in the face, but when she does

> You have't, and soundly too—
> Peppered I warrant me.

And not alone upon the stage, but at home, and in the boudoir, she can direct the full power of their orbits with an accuracy of aim which seldom fails to hit the right centre. Her disposition is sociable, and her manners unaffected and amiable; extremely recherché in her pursuits, touches the guitar, and fingers the piano; is fond of pets, sofa-tables, scrap-books and flowers: indeed her passion for the latter is so inordinate, that if she ever, for a moment, could entertain a *liaison*, it would be either with a member of the Botanical Garden at Chelsea, or the Compiler of the *Flora Britannica*. Chimney ornaments, vases, crockery-bars, and utensils are made subservient to woodbines, jessamine, myrtle, rose-buds, gilly flowers, "heart's-ease," auriculas, "love-lies-bleeding," and "London pride." And should there be a scarcity of ordinary vessels to meet her supply, sauce-boats, gravy-tureen, and vegetable dish must, in their turn, succumb to her darling recreation. In reference to her earliest admirers, alluded to in our former number, we might descant upon many an anonymous billet-doux and love sonnet, which she still has the courtesy to treasure in the sealed leaves of her album.

> Georgics and rural lays from swains unknown,
> Lyrics from lords and cavaliers unblest;
> But all unheeded as the roll of time,
> Or chaff upon the waters.

The writer in *Actors by Daylight* echoes the same facts, in the same journalistic style.

In her domestic circle she is no less celebrated, for she has many pets besides her husband—indeed, it has now become fashionable for ladies to patronize either a dog, cat, parrot, or such-like; she is an admirable musician, and plays delightfully upon the piano, etc.; is very fond of flowers, seldom scolds, and is altogether a partner of *sterling* worth.

* * * * *

For an actress so immature as Mrs. Stirling still was to make her first appearance at Drury Lane,[1] in such a part as "Beatrice," was no light task. "Beatrice" touches life at many points. Born though she be under a merry star—a wit, a tease, a hoyden and a romp—she is yet withal a matured woman, living throughout the climax of the play in a "Much Ado," which, though "About Nothing," was real to her in the soul's agony of "Hero," and in the stirrings of her own new-born love. Though she never touches tragedy, she comes within hail of it in the words, "Kill, Claudio!" and "O! that I were a man, I would eat his heart in the market-place!"

The actress who shall play "Beatrice" as she should be played must be more than a merry, witty, and bewitching maid. She must be the full woman, knowing life, knowing her world, and having at command, in addition to dignity, something of that breadth of vision and innate nobility of soul that every Shakespearean heroine possesses, and that, lost in the interpretation, deprive the poet's words of half their beauty and meaning.

Did she then succeed? No! not unless "a perfect uproar of applause" at the fall of the curtain proves success. It does not, nor ever will. Technically, in the fuller meaning of that word, she failed completely.

Mrs. Stirling's "Beatrice" was a mistake, says *The Times*.[2] She was not the creature of full animal spirits that was born under a merry star, but a pert lady whose vivacity had to begin afresh at each line, and who uttered every witticism with a sort of shrewish snap—a very pizzicato person.

It is only fair to point out, however, that her "Benedick,"

[1] October 30, 1839.

[2] October 31, 1839.

Marston, appears to have been uninspiring, since, according to the same critic, he

> uttered his repartees with a solemnity that would have caused him rather to be called the Prince's chaplain than his jester . . . his performance was perfectly soulless, and with every variety of action there was no life.

Yet—all excuses made—"Beatrice's" failure, evidently, was, at bottom, her own. She had not been able altogether to throw off the saucy soubrette and the singing chambermaid of Adelphi and pre-Adelphi days, nor had she yet acquired the experience of life, the knowledge of her art, the ease and the breadth of style necessary for the successful portrayal of such a character as "Beatrice." Her technique, in short, was immature: and Shakespeare tests the technique through and through, challenges it at every point. Her time of great achievement was not yet.[1]

"'Beatrice,' had commented the *Sunday Times*, "is, or ought to be, the study of a year at least." There the writer hinted at another reason for her failure. She was overworked from the start of the season. Hammond, the manager, conscious that he possessed, in his leading lady, a most willing actress, of quite unusual charm, energy, and versatility, put part after part upon her. On November 8 she plays "Charlotte" in "The Hypocrite"; on the 10th "Sally Scraggs" in "An Englishman in India"; on the 11th "Cora" in "Pizarro"; and, while still playing "Beatrice" occasionally, adds to these, at the end of the month, "Ellen Marchmont" in "A Woman's Trials."

Not that Hammond was no better than a less guilty Bunn. On the contrary, he was an honest and well-meaning individual; but he was too short of cash,[2] and he lacked the experience, if not the ability, required for the successful running of a great theatre. He had begun his career as a comic singer in the "Long Room" at Bagnigge Wells;

[1] Most of the sterner critics were uncomplimentary. The *Sunday Times* (November 10, 1839) wrote: "Mrs. Stirling exhibited great liveliness and spirit, but she must not let the former run away with her. She played 'Beatrice' archly and with great promise, but 'Beatrice' is, or ought to be, the study of a year at least."

[2] Salaries were not regularly paid, even from the beginning of the season.

then, after some country work, had played small parts at the Haymarket, before returning to the provinces, where ultimately he became a favourite. Bristol knew him, and York and Liverpool, in which latter town—at the Liver—and later at the Strand, he redeemed his fortune.

Many disappointments awaited his opening of Drury Lane. Wallack, engaged to appear in a new play by Jerrold, had been detained in New York by the burning of the National Theatre; promises of financial assistance were not kept; he opened at a loss of about £100 a night; and though his company, sympathizing with his misfortunes, stood by him, and consented to play three or four nights only instead of six, he was in a bad way. Moreover, he ran the theatre without sound judgment, casting himself for parts in which—not having played them for years—he was unpardonably imperfect, putting on a new piece hastily, and without care; announcing performers who were not yet engaged, and failing to announce those who were. But this was not the worst.

Mr. T. Parry brought to the theatre a drama entitled "Woman's Trials," already mentioned. It was read, approved, announced, despite the openly expressed opinion of many performers that the play, if produced, would be unsuccessful. Hammond, unexperienced in the equipment of serious drama, persisted, and, in the absence of the author, through domestic trouble, the piece was carelessly rehearsed and stage-managed—both call-boy and property-man being permitted to neglect their duties.

"Woman's Trials" indeed! From the first everything went wrong. The pistol with which the fair "Ellen" (Mrs. Stirling) should have defended—against the villain—her life and "chi-ild" would not go off. That child, who had been shown to the audience during the first act, should have been discovered at the commencement of the second. Up went the curtain; on came the distracted mother; but no child was there. The actress rushed to the wings, snatched up the first youngster she could see—not the original one—and re-rushed back again, to an accompaniment of audible mirth. The third act was soundly hissed, and the piece, at last, damned so thoroughly that it could not be put on even for a second night.

Critics consoled the disconsolate heroine as best they might.

> Mrs. Stirling is a clever, sparkling actress, possessing great versatility, but it is too much to expect her to sustain five or six lines of character effectively. She looked very beautiful, spoke very sensibly, and, in the first two acts, did all that the part permitted, but the sibilatory symptoms completely subdued her, and her last act was exceedingly tame.

Marston, moreover, "who gave a sort of semi-imitation of Charles Kemble in his latter days," made an ineffective lover. "On the whole," comments the writer, "'Beatrice,' 'Sally Scraggs,' 'Mrs. Simpson'"—and, he might have added, "Ellen Marchmont"—"are too much at a time for one lady." [1]

Even the "sibilatory symptoms" could not now drive Mrs. Stirling again to retirement. On the contrary, early in December she boldly, and successfully, took up another new part, "Gabrielle de Brionne" in "A Night in the Bastille," [2] which, with "Albert" in "Cupid's Diplomacy," terminated her season at Drury Lane. The last-named play was a dictionary translation from the French, concerning Stanislaus Leckzinski, ex-King of Poland, played by Archer. Mrs. Stirling attempted the youthful King of France, Louis XV, who comes, disguised as a Lieutenant, to witness the charms of his beloved Marie, whom he duly marries. She—that is he, Louis XV—strutted about in a dress sublimely becoming, and seems to have been sufficiently male and kingly, though Mrs. Selby played up to her badly by putting "too much Chartist feeling" into her princess, thereby lowering the royal dignity of her lord and master.

From Drury Lane Mrs. Stirling went to the Olympic, to take up Mrs. Glover's part in a witty little sketch by Mark Lemon, "The Ladies' Club," first produced on February 26, when the leading comédienne of the day played "Mrs. Fitzsmith," the chairwoman. This was a light, slight entertainment, depicting the endeavour of a coterie of wives—neglected by their club-haunting husbands—to

[1] *Sunday Times*, December 1, 1839.

[2] "To Mrs. Stirling the author is under great obligation." *The Times*, December 6, 1839.

establish a club of their own. Its interest, to us, is that it first links Mrs. Stirling, in stage history, with Mrs. Glover—that "soul of humour," as Macready calls her—who had already been playing the chairwoman with a gusto and rich unction unequalled by any comedy actress of her day. Her opening speech in this trifle was, it seems, a model of what such a thing should be—a lesson in public speaking, not lost, we may be sure, upon her understudy and ultimate successor, when, on March 20, Mrs. Stirling took her part in that easy trifle, "The Ladies' Club." That the change was for the worse we may be reasonably certain. The younger woman, compared with that grand old lady of the comedy stage, was, doubtless, still crude and immature. She was but at the outset of a career destined to be as long, though less unbroken, than that of Mrs. Glover herself. The reader will note how large a space of our drama's history—from 1780 to 1886; from Sheridan to Pinero—is covered by these two stage lives.

Mrs. Stirling, it is pleasant to record, became a great personal favourite of Mrs. Glover, as she did also of that other stage veteran, William Farren; and though it was often said, right up to the sixties, that the older actress had been followed by no competent successor, Mrs. Stirling was always pointed to, by the acuter critics, as the comédienne who would step into her shoes. Thus *The Players* of February 25, 1860:

> If Mrs. Stirling ever sees fit to essay the lady's (Mrs. Glover's) line, the world will see that we have one (i.e. a successor) in her, and one that would have satisfied the dear old lady herself.

That hope was, in a large measure, fulfilled.

CHAPTER V

WITH MACREADY AT THE HAYMARKET

1840–41

Macready's early career—His style as an actor; personal character, and methods as manager—Contemporary criticisms of him—Mrs. Stirling joins him at the Haymarket—Takes up Mrs. Nisbett's part, "Constance" in "The Love Chase"—"Sophia" in "The Road to Ruin"—Comment upon Holcroft's play—She replaces Helen Faucit as "Clara" in "Money"—Miss Faucit as an actress—Mrs. Stirling plays "Lady Franklin" in "Money"—Contemporary criticism of "Money"—Plays "Rachel Heywood" in "The Rent Day"—Douglas Jerrold—Mrs. Stirling's deficiencies as a portrayer of pathos—Birth of a daughter.

MACREADY, under whose management, at the Haymarket, Mrs. Stirling next acted, was the predominant theatrical figure of the day. Coming to London, as we have seen, in the autumn of 1816, he had witnessed, during the following year, the proud withdrawal of John Philip Kemble—a retirement hastened unquestionably by Edmund Kean's ever-increasing reputation and success. That great tragedian at first overshadowed the younger man; but "grim Mac's" triumph as "Richard III," at Covent Garden, on October 25, 1819, established him as Kean's rival, while the latter's long absences in America, and the infrequency of Young's appearances, gave Macready further opportunities that he was not slow to take advantage of.

Little by little the newcomer, who had first modelled his style upon that of Elliston, began to imitate Kean's method of making points, though he applied it to new characters.[1] After Kean's premature death, the adoption, or adaptation, by Macready, of his late rival's technique, in certain scenes of "Macbeth," "Othello," and other rôles had become evident, according to Hazlitt.[2] But—imitator though he may have been upon occasion—Macready, by

[1] *Sunday Times*, February 11, 1840. [2] *London Magazine.*

1840, had won for himself a position of unchallenged supremacy upon the London stage. Never really in love with his art, swayed too often by mood, and consequently uneven in his performances, his standard of individual achievement was, nevertheless, very high, especially in the portrayal of such heroes of the then popular artificial melodrama, as "Werner," or "Virginius." His Shakespearean impersonations[1] were not generally considered to be upon the same level of excellence; but, in all parts that afforded him opportunity, he could and did give exhibitions of passion, and of power, that would thrill and electrify an audience.[2]

Nor were his technical accomplishments as an actor the sole claim to the supremacy he then enjoyed. In a day when, as we have seen, some managers were incompetent, and many were unscrupulous, Macready was business-like, energetic, careful, and of unblemished honour. We have already noted his war against the monopoly of the patent theatres, against claques and lying puffs; he was further to do splendid work in remedying social abuses among the audiences, and in raising generally the tone of our national drama to a pitch of decency and of dignity never attained before, nor often since, in the long history of our stage.

One might well have supposed, then, that such a man

[1] Fanny Kemble, in the third volume of her *Records of Later Life*, expresses openly, after her candid fashion, her opinion on Macready as a fellow actor. He "is not pleasant to act with . . . he growls and prowls and roams and foams about the stage." Then again: "I really believe Macready cannot help being as odious as he is on the stage. . . ."

Her points against him are, lack of consideration for his fellow players, and lack of self-control upon the stage. He was often violent, and would sometimes maul his actresses until they were black and blue. One of them, before playing with him, expressed her intention of putting so many pins into her hair and so arranging them, that he would be unable to hold her head "in chancery," as he was apparently given to doing. Miss Kemble comments also upon his total lack of comic power, and his weakness in Shakespeare. His lack of rhythmic sense made him cut up his lines into prose; but, on the other hand, if his ear was insensitive, his eye was not. He had all a painter's feeling for colour, grouping, and scenic effect.

[2] Concerning the tragedian's deficiencies, the *Theatrical Times* has some pertinent comments. "Macready, in his fear of being thought melodramatic, was generally dull, and yet there is intensity beneath the surface in all that he does" (November 28, 1846).

Significant, too, is the same journal's comment upon his work as a manager. "Isolation of effect is the besetting sin of Macready, who, as far as that goes, is the veriest amateur living. He does not get up a play, he gets up a part—that part being his own" (June 13, 1846).

—so highly talented, and so uniformly successful—might have moved happily, hopefully, among his fellow men. Yet he did not so. On the contrary, those same acute sensibilities, and insatiable cravings, that transformed Macready the man into Macready the tragedian, rendered him difficult, irascible, and petulant. An idealist, as much as an artist, at heart, conventional at the same time, and therefore dissatisfied with the conditions of his calling; hungering always after a respectability and a gentility generally non-existent in the stage-life of his day, he was ever at odds with the world. Consequent reserve and *mauvaise-honte*—mistaken always for pride—had made him, too often, chilling and distant towards other members of his profession.[1] Frequently he was supercilious, arrogant, and overbearing, haughty and imperious to all but his most intimate friends. Through our mental pictures of the players of his day, self-revealed in the pages of his diary, he moves, an ambitious, unhappy, lonely soul, warring ever against his worse self, despising an art to which he is chained only by material necessity; [2] yet, withal, a man to be honoured—moral, just, generous, faithful, tender, and true. Few more complex personalities have ever trod the stage of life.

Such a man was Mrs. Stirling's new manager at the Haymarket. He cannot have been a very easy one to work with, because his methods—if we may judge by contemporary press articles—were often as drastic and as peculiar as were his manners. The tragedian, we may premise, having brought, to assist him at Drury Lane, Phelps, Howe, Wilmot and Mrs. Warren, was reckless in his manner of replacing them, and dictatorial in his methods at rehearsal.[3]

A leading actor being enabled to nominate the performers that shall play with him establishes a tyranny and monopoly of a most dangerous character. . . . A rehearsal under the present régime is a mighty pretty thing—it resembles drill-day. Sergeant Macready takes his recruits, rehearses for and with them, making them all speak

[1] *Memoirs of Madame Vestris* (Mrs. Charles Mathews), 1839.

[2] Whether Macready was a great artist I venture to doubt. Has there ever existed a great artist who neither loved nor respected his art? In his diary, April 22, 1848, he calls acting "the worst exercise of a man's intellect."

[3] *Sunday Times*, January 20, 1840. This refers to a previous engagement at Drury Lane.

in his own peculiar manner, conceive, read, and execute the parts his way; in fact forcing, or striving to force them, to surrender soul, mind, and body to his guidance and direction. By this system a prominent actor at Covent Garden has sunk to the place of a servile imitator.[1] These gratuitous lectures upon acting delivered morning after morning by Macready, are not always conducted with the calmness of demeanour a lecturer should employ. . . . The complaints of Covent Garden were long and loud; there Macready was aided by the drills of a literary corporal—one putting the text to rights, the other the actors. Those whose characters were to be emasculated were told to "keep your eye on the corporal"; those who were likely to create too much effect executively were kept in awe of the castigation of the sergeant; if they persisted they could be removed from the company or left out of active service.

This not too grammatical, and probably exaggerated, version of Macready's methods refers mainly to the men; but the ladies of the company, it seems, were by no means exempt from the Macreadyizing system. Miss Helen Faucit, we read, learned also to chop up her sentences, quite in the tragedian's fashion, to make sudden transitions, to affect the "Macready pause"—as the actors' phrase still has it—and even to adopt his peculiar gait and positions. "These defects we forgive in him, for that his powers as an actor redeem all, but they are odious in a woman."

Whether, or to what extent, "the sergeant" drilled Mrs. Stirling, we do not know; but we may suppose that she was no more immune from such attention than were her companions, nor can she much have disapproved of her manager, for Miss Mary Anderson (Mme. de Navarro), who was an intimate friend of Mrs. Stirling, tells me that the old actress often expressed, to her, appreciation of Macready and of his methods. Enough, however, has been said to show to the reader the more selfish and hectoring side of Macready's character; another and better side is revealed by Phelps' description of the grim tragedian's act of generosity to a brother actor in distress,[2] which is only one of Macready's many open-handed and open-hearted deeds.

[1] Phelps, who succeeded Macready as our leading tragedian, was generally held to have imitated Macready. He would never admit the charge. See *Toole's Reminiscences*, by Hatton, p. 279.

[2] Phelps himself. See Coleman's *Phelps*, p. 172.

Mrs. Stirling's first interesting part under her new manager[1] was "Lady Rodolpha Lumbercourt," in "The Man of the World," Macklin's last play, and probably his best, written to bring Maywood before the public in the character of "Sir Pertinax Macsycophant." There followed "Countess Wintersen" in "The Stranger," and "Rosalie Somers" in "Town and Country"; but a performance that probably gave her more pleasure was "Constance," in that lively, versified farce by Sheridan Knowles, "The Love Chase," which, for warmth and generosity of humour, stands alone in the poetical comedy of the day and comes near to Elizabethan merit. It had been first produced, with great success, at the Haymarket, in October 1837, Mrs. Glover playing the widow, and Mrs. Nisbett "Constance"—parts thoroughly suited to them both. Indeed, it was of the last-named lady, in "The Love Chase," that the author of *Memoirs of Madame Vestris* (1839) had written:

> It would almost appear that she had sat for the character—arch and vivacious, a regular romp, acting on the impulse of the moment, and speaking the words that first present themselves, she is the very life and soul of every society that is fortunate enough to obtain her presence.

November brought a revival of "The Road to Ruin," Holcroft's bustling comedy, first performed at Covent Garden in 1792. This play had led the way to a fashion of dialogue in which the extremes of moral sentiment and slang catchword met, and had given us, in "Goldfinch," the forerunner of the dashing-impertinent school of character, and one of the best examples of it that the English stage can show. The repetition of gags, we all agree, is a poor enough stage device—conducive, as one critic has said, to the spread, rather than to the increase, of wit; yet, nevertheless, that part of "Goldfinch" alone, really well acted, is good enough, almost, to make a popular success of any comedy. The hilarious effect upon the house of "Damn all dancing-masters and their umbrellas," and the quick-fire affirmatives—"That's your sort"—as spoken by Lewis, are still traditions

[1] September 29, 1840.

upon the stage. For all its crudity, this is an outstanding comedy of its day, and one that might bear occasional revival by one of the non-commercial play-producing societies, who, not without reason, neglect early nineteenth-century drama in general.

As the *Examiner* put it, "The Road to Ruin," though not one of the wisest of comedies, is the work of a true-hearted and original man. It has no false sentiment, and none of those whining, equivocal expressions of morality, "in which there is nothing real but the vices they disguise." Mrs. Stirling's part, "Sophia," is rather too insipid and school-girlish to have been very much to her liking, but she succeeded ultimately in making it extraordinary effective. The *Examiner*, writing of the same play, some two years later,[1] says:

> Mrs. Stirling is a "Sophia" that no lover of genuine comedy should fail to see. The part allows of that touch of excess that is now and then the defect of her acting, and the result is perfect. Things that have been said of the best comic actresses on record might here be again said justly. Holcroft would have thanked her—would have hugged her for it.

Upon the reopening of the Haymarket for the winter season, in February 1841, Macready, always averse from long runs, continued to perform his promise, by giving his patrons variety in their drama. Mrs. Stirling's first appearance was on January 7, 1842, when she replaced Helen Faucit, as "Clara," the sentimental heroine of Bulwer's comedy, "Money." Miss Faucit, afterwards Lady Martin, was that beautiful and talented actress upon whose name De Quincey closes his catalogue of "things soft to sight."

> He who has seen the Coliseum by moonlight, the Bay of Naples by sunset, the battlefield of Waterloo by daybreak, and Miss Helen Faucit in "Antigone," has only to thank God and die, since nothing else remains worth living for.

To De Quincey's conclusion I demur wholly, but it does seem certain that Miss Faucit possessed a tender, classical beauty, of a style rarely equalled upon the stage, and that some similar qualifications were needed by one who would

[1] October 1842.

MRS. STIRLING, ABOUT 1840.

From an Engraving by R. Lane, R.A.

To face p. 68.

follow closely in her footsteps. Here was further proof that the actress, who of late had so successfully replaced La Nisbett in "Constance," could now challenge comparison also with Helen Faucit as "Clara." [1]

Macready was more than satisfied, for he wrote in his diary [2]: "Was much pleased with Mrs. Stirling in 'Clara.' She speaks with a freshness and truth of tone that *no other* actress in the stage can now do." With the month of May, however, she is transferred to a much more congenial, because more lively, part, in the same play—"Lady Franklin," originally played by Mrs. Glover. That she was still far less than Mrs. Glover's equal is certain. The *Sunday Times* wrote [3]:

> We missed the easy flow of voice and action, the rich though subdued comedy which marked the performance of the latter lady (Mrs. Glover); for though Mrs. Stirling possesses a sufficiency of hilarious vivacity of spirit, that makes her a general favourite, she still needs much improvement to render her a perfect actress.

She was yet far from maturity; and this, surely, is ever the actress's tragedy—that not until the charm of early youth and the first flush of beauty are about to fail, or have already waned, can she hope to reach full self-expression in her art.

Of the play itself, what can we say? Full of its author's worst faults—stiffness, staginess, artificiality—"remote from nature, crammed with the commonplaces of colloquialism and affectations of sentiment, it is—to quote a contemporary critic—a heterogeneous and clumsy mixture of farce, comedy, and Bartholomew Fair."

This is impolite and overstated, yet, crudely as the play reveals itself to modern judgment, there is about it, nevertheless—as also in "The Lady of Lyons"—a certain dynamic quality, of which a capable cast can make use. Well put upon the stage, and admirably acted, such merits as it had, and the acknowledged status of the author, drew the world of fashion to the Haymarket. "Money" and Macready triumphed.[4]

[1] Madame de Navarro tells me that Helen Faucit used to speak to her very highly of Mrs. Stirling's work.

[2] January 7, 1841.

[3] May 9, 1841.

[4] Macready in his diary, December 16, 1840, describes "Evelyn," nevertheless, as "an ineffective, inferior part."

When reading the annals of the Victorian stage, one wonders often how a modern player, man or woman, would come through such trials of memory, physique, and technique, as those which were laid upon the Haymarket company at this time. Part after part, character after character, each as arduous as its predecessor, is the leading lady called upon to assume. On April 12 Mrs. Stirling takes up the rôle of "Rachel Heywood," the much-tried wife, in that characteristic, though now forgotten, drama of its time, "The Rent Day," [1] one of the happiest efforts of that prolific dramatist, Douglas Jerrold.

Jerrold, despite his tongue's "venomed sting," to which Phelps so bitterly alludes,[2] was a warm-hearted, quixotic individual, much given to tilting at windmills. In this instance, inflamed by an inspection of Wilkie's famous pictures,[3] he protests against the wrongs inflicted, consciously or unconsciously, upon resident tenants by absentee landlords. Mrs. Stirling's part, "Rachel Heywood," was one in which she never succeeded in satisfying thoroughly all her critics, though few of them damned her so completely as did a writer in the *Dramatic and Musical Review*, when, some two and a half years later,[4] he wrote concerning the same play:

> Mrs. Stirling is unequal to the expression of deep pathos—the agonizing grief and terrible suspense in which the heart-broken wife views the pangs of her ruined and despairing husband; her emotion was transparent, her manner weak and artificial.

The dramatical reviewer, perhaps, had caught her on an off-night; but his censure may have been in part deserved, for Mrs. Stirling was destined, for years to come, to be castigated by those who could not, or would not, take her seriously in serious work. That she was inherently capable of rendering pathos, such later performances as "Cordelia," and "Adrienne Lecouvreur," were abundantly to prove; but I am inclined to think that the very acuteness of her intelligence, and her overflowing sense of humour, would

[1] First played January 25, 1832.
[2] Coleman's *Phelps*, p. 183.
[3] See Walter Jerrold's *Life of Douglas Jerrold*.
[4] November 27, 1844.

allow her to feel and sustain the pathetic, only when character and situation were, to her mind, sufficiently true, natural, and vivid, to evoke her full powers of sympathy and imagination. Even when all other conditions were favourable, she was never able to sustain tragic intensity over a long period.

We have no time to linger over other performanees during the spring and summer at the Haymarket, that—redecorated during the Easter recess—was now probably the smartest house in London. Mrs. Stirling played "Helen" in Knowles' dull play, "The Hunchbaek"; "Countess Wintersen," in "The Stranger," with the Charles Keans; and "Amelia," in "The Philosopher of Berlin," a Voltaire play, that, though undramatic in quality, had some literary merit, and moved the *Examiner* to say that "he had not seen a pleasanter thing for a considerable time." Wallack, as "Voltaire," made the philosopher boisterous, rather than petulant and irascible, as he really was; but the entertainment, as a whole, did not fail.

Among Mrs. Stirling's closing parts were the comedy lead in Lunn's "Belford Castle," and "Lady Traffic" in "Riches," an adaptation by J. B. Burges, of Massinger's hard, unpleasant, and "violently wrought" play, "The City Madam." Macready himself was heavy and laboured in Kean's old part of "Luke"; and if he was displeased with himself—as he very often was—he was equally so, on this occasion, with Mrs. Stirling, whom he wrote down as "decidedly bad"—a verdict that the critics endorsed.

During that autumn the actress, for domestic reasons, retired temporarily from active work,[1] and did little of importance, until the autumn of 1842 brought her again, under Macready's management, to Drury Lane.

[1] The writer's mother, Fanny Stirling, was born February 7, 1842.

CHAPTER VI

DRURY LANE AND THE STRAND

1842–43

Historic performance of "As You Like It" at Drury Lane—Phelps' eulogy of the cast—Mrs. Stirling's success as "Celia"—Mrs. Nisbett—Dryden's "King Arthur"—"The Eton Boy"—Great success with Mrs. Nisbett in Congreve's "Love for Love"—Failure in Browning's "Blot on the 'Scutcheon"—Reasons for dramatic failure of nineteenth-century great writers—Theatrical art lags behind the thought of the time—Romantic movements in France and England—Alfred Wigan and transition to natural-romantic—The Keeley's benefit—Their styles—Mrs. Stirling plays "Mrs. Blandish" in Lunn's "Rights of Woman"—Bunn again—Dissensions—Failure in "Lady Anne" in "Richard III"—Reasons therefor.

Now and again in the annals of the stage, a certain performance, though given upon no special occasion, nor with any unusual glamour of publicity, will stand out beacon-bright above its fellows, by reason of the quality of its cast, and the technical excellence of the acting. Such was the now historic performance of "As You Like It," in which, on October 1, 1842, Mrs. Stirling reappeared at Drury Lane, on the occasion of the opening of Macready's second season.

Phelps, who played "Adam," enthuses thus to Coleman [1]:

> Apart from Clarkson Stanfield's magnificent scenery, the music and the mounting—look at the cast! There was Nisbett as "Rosalind"! Not having seen her, *ye* don't know what beauty is. Her voice was liquid music—her laugh—there never was such a laugh!—her eyes living crystals—lamps lit with the light divine!—her gorgeous neck and shoulders—her superbly symmetrical limbs—her grace, her taste, her nameless but irresistible charm. There was Mrs. Stirling as "Celia"—let me tell you a deuced fine woman in those days—then and always a most accomplished actress. That imp of mischief, Mrs. Keeley, the best "Audrey," and about the best all-round actress

[1] Coleman's *Phelps*, p. 188 *et seq.*

I have ever seen ; the beautiful Miss Phillips as " Phœbe," the velvet-throated Romer as " Cupid " in the " Masques ". . . .[1]

Never, concluded Phelps, had there been such a cast of " As You Like It " before, nor ever would there be again.

Phelps was probably right. Such a company has never played Rosalind's love story before, nor since. The more credit, therefore, to the central figure of this book, that in such distinguished company she more than held her own. Forster, in the *Examiner*, wrote :

The " Celia " of Mrs. Stirling seemed to us the prettiest, quietest, most sensible, most graceful, and, if we may say so, most open-hearted piece of acting we have seen of that kind for many a day.

Notable are those words " open-hearted " ; they express a priceless quality of Mrs. Stirling's, as of all great art.

Concerning her success upon that night *The Times* was equally emphatic :

Mrs. Stirling's " Celia " was all that could be desired—full of feeling and playfulness most naturally expressed. This, and the part of " Orlando," by Anderson, were the most satisfactorily acted, in a play upon which the curtain fell to the most tumultuous waving of hats and handkerchiefs that ever agitated a crowded pit.

Macready wrote, that evening, in his diary : " She (Mrs. Stirling) and Anderson's ' Orlando ' much praised."

And what of Mrs. Nisbett, the admired of Phelps, into whose place also the new " Celia " was to step ? To the charm and ability of that actress, others, though not so graphically as Phelps, have borne witness. Macready has told us of the " fascinating power in the sweetly ringing notes of her laugh," and Edward Stirling[2] has recorded that she was

always drawing and filling treasuries when acting in her best parts of " Rosalind," " Lady Teazle," " Lady Gay Spanker," [3] and " Constance." Who that ever heard her merry laugh at neighbour Wildrake's stupidity can ever forget it ?

By that laugh principally she conquered.

[1] Other members of the cast were : " Duke," Ryder ; " First Lord," Elton ; " Jaques," Macready ; " Oliver," Graham ; " Orlando," Anderson ; " Touchstone," Keeley ; Sims Reeves sang.

[2] *Old Drury Lane*, ii. 166.

[3] In " London Assurance."

Mrs. Nisbett, it was, whom the younger actress followed,[1] as "Emmeline," in Dryden's "King Arthur," a play that, thanks largely to Purcell's music, held the stage after much of its author's other dramatic work was forgotten, or ignored. Walter Scott tells us that "King Arthur" was still acted in his day; but this must have been one of its last popular revivals. Dryden has never since returned to fashion as a dramatist, nor will he, we suppose, though, if The Phœnix Society maintain their most welcome activities, we may yet have occasional opportunities to realize again Dryden's greatness as a writer for the stage, and to see some companion pictures to that brilliant comedy "Mariage à la Mode."[2]

After the seventeenth-century play came a return to farce, when Macready, still pursuing his policy of variety, put on "The Eton Boy," by Mathews I believe, though some have fathered it upon Lemon. Whoever wrote it, the trifle gave Mrs. Stirling an opportunity that, no doubt, she thoroughly enjoyed, of appearing as an Etonian, dressed in a smart pepper-and-salt suit, with her hair in a state of boyish negligence, a disguise that she completed by carrying a neat fowling-piece, adopting a pretty swagger, and firing off dog-and-gun descriptions with the greatest animation.

November brought to her, in company with Mrs. Nisbett, one of the most completely successful and happiest occasions of her whole career—"Mrs. Foresight" in "Love for Love."

We do not all care greatly for Congreve. His cynicism often irritates, and his indecencies sometimes disgust even the hardened play-goer; but concerning his power of dramatic construction, his ability to depict shades of character, his infectious love of mischief, his flashing wit and abounding sense of humour, his picturesqueness, and his complete—sometimes too complete—mastery of dialogue and repartee, there can be no question whatever. All these qualities abound in that great comedy "Love for Love," and to them all a woman of Mrs. Stirling's temperament was instantly and completely responsive. The subdued pose, the demure

[1] November 16, 1842.

[2] Produced at The Lyric, Hammersmith, on February 8–9, 1920, when Miss Cathleen Nisbett and Miss Athene Seyler gave remarkable performances as "Doralice" and "Melanthea."

mischief, the arch expression, the watchful eye, were all there; nor was her partner, Mrs. Nisbett, a whit less ready. Upon their merits contemporary criticism is at one.

"The scene between the quarrelling sisters was the gem of the evening so far as genuine acting was concerned." [1] The *Examiner*, too, enjoyed himself hugely:

> As for "Mrs. Frail" and "Mrs. Foresight," they are themselves a comedy. The buoyancy, the spirit, the pleasure; the comment of the arch look, the quiet laugh, the gay and graceful movement; the sharp relish of every word in the dialogue, the delicate and joyous apprehension of the finest shades of the wit—nothing is wanting to the glory of Congreve. The Bracegirdles and the Oldfields could not have set it forth more bravely.[2]

Already Mrs. Stirling was moving swiftly towards her destined position as the leading actress of her day in high comedy.

But the whirligig of time brings set-backs and revenges. With the next year came a failure. On February 11, 1843, Macready produced a drama by his friend-to-be, the poet, Robert Browning, who was then fast rising into eminence among many promising men of letters.

"The Blot on the 'Scutcheon," however, did not succeed. There were mistakes and misunderstandings between author and actor-manager. Macready did not attend rehearsals until shortly before the first night, and he made many alterations at the last moment. Phelps wanted more time. "Well, sir, if I understudy your part, and do it on Saturday, do you think you will be ready by Monday?"

Phelps thought that, after all, he might be ready by Saturday!

It seems, too, that the drama was not well cast, for Macready writes of it in his diary as "badly acted in Phelps's and Mrs. Stirling's parts"—she played "Gwendolen"—"pretty well in Anderson's, very well in Helen Faucit's." One critic suggested that Mrs. Stirling's part should be cut out [3]; another that the play, as a whole, was under-

[1] *Dramatic and Musical Review*, November 26, 1842.
[2] *Examiner*, November 26, 1842.
[3] *Sunday Times*, February 12, 1843: "Mrs. Stirling played a half sentimental part with the flippancy of a soubrette in the clothes of her mistress."

acted; but the reasons for its early withdrawal—it ran some three nights only—are to be found in the inherent dramatic weakness of the piece. Though Robert Browning could, and did at times, conceive dramatically, the drama, nevertheless, was not his natural mode of expression. His mind could not easily be bent to meet the stage's inexorable demands upon form, and its insistent call for directness and for clarity. His thought may have been always lucid to himself at the moment of its conception, but in expression he often condensed the idea into complete obscurity.

There existed, moreover, more than individual reasons why the literary giants of those days were not yet competent to make the stage their medium. During those years the romantic movement, that had been inaugurated in English poetry by Byron, Shelley, Keats, and others—and by Victor Hugo and his school across the Channel—was fast developing; but though "Hernani,"[1] on February 25, 1830, had established the new vogue upon the stage of the French capital, romance had not yet made good in the English theatre, nor could it possibly do so until the development of all theatrical art—essentially conservative, and lagging always tardily behind the latest thought—had made some *rapprochement* possible. New wine may not be put into old bottles, nor the romantic expressed in terms of the classic. The theatre must needs adjust itself to the nascent idea, by begetting a corresponding style of actor, a newer fashion in setting, and an audience mentally equipped for such changes.

The latter was not yet ready, or not ready in sufficient numbers. Our theatre-loving majority continued awhile to like their drama hot and strong, declamatory and forceful; and the demand, still, was for actors to match. That is why Charles Mathews, for example—a progenitor of the new school—is fated to languish in the durance of Lancaster Castle, before establishing his position as a public favourite. Nevertheless, he did secure it. At the very time of which

[1] "Par le seul fait d'Hernani la question romantique etait portée de cent lieux en avant," wrote a French author. But our theatrical development, like our revolutionary growth, progresses by easier stages here than in France. Though no one guessed it at the time, our "Hernani" was the triumph of Edmund Kean over John Kemble. See *ante*, p. 21.

we write, the transition was in process, from the stilted classicism of the declaimers, to the romantic lightness of the Bancroft school. A certain versatile young character-actor, Alfred Wigan,[1] was fast making a name for himself. The author of "Caste"[2] was already fourteen years old; and in Scandinavia had been born (1828) a greater than he, one destined to exert an enormous influence upon the European theatre. It is customary to speak of the mid-Victorian era as a time of dramatic decadence, and, in a sense, the charge is true; but for those who have an eye of faith upon the whole century, the transitional period is generally full of interest, and always and brightly full of hope. But we must return to Drury Lane.

On May 6 and 10 Mrs. Stirling played for benefits, first as "Mrs. Candour" in "The School for Scandal," with Mrs. Nisbett, the beneficiare, as "Lady Teazle." "Mrs. Candour," together with other parts in old English comedy, such as "Mrs. Malaprop," were impersonations in which Mrs. Stirling, when she had fully developed them, was never excelled for significance and point by any actress that has trodden our stage.

The second benefit was that for Mr. and Mrs. Keeley, when my grandmother played "Lady Freelove" in "The Jealous Wife." These two famous comedians of low life, the Keeleys, were then at the zenith of their popularity. The woman—for all her great cleverness—never rose higher than the portrayal of kitchen and back-stair characters—her "Audrey" was magnificent—but Keeley was more versatile. He generally ranked, and was often contrasted, with Buckstone, the other favourite low comedian of the time, with whom Mrs. Stirling had often played at the Adelphi and elsewhere. Buckstone was the more striking personality of the two. He was the pet of every audience, and the chosen laugh-maker of many an inveterate pittite, including John Hollingshead.

[1] Then twenty-seven years old: born March 24, 1816: died November 29, 1878. Modelled on Bouffé, a French actor of the nineteenth century. Wigan, according to Knight, lacked robustness and breadth, but was excellent in such French and semi-French parts as "Monsieur Jacques." My mother, Fanny Stirling the younger, looked upon him as one of the progenitors of the new school of acting.

[2] Born January 9, 1829.

Buckstone was always a salient figure upon the stage, blowing the trumpet all the time, as who should say: "Attention to me: something droll is about to happen." And usually it did. Keeley, on the contrary, was phlegmatic, impassive, and pathetically acquiescent in the quaint inflictions that his stage fate had always in store for him. By a modern audience both men, I think, would have been adjudged coarse and vulgar.

"Gilbertha"—for Miss Faucit's benefit—in "Athelwold," a new play by W. Smith, seems to have been Mrs. Stirling's last performance during that season at Drury Lane, for on June 5, consequently upon a sudden and severe illness of Mrs. Orger, we find her engaged at the Strand, by Maywood, the Scotch comedian, to play "Mrs. Blandish" in Lunn's "Rights of Woman," a comedy which the leading lady herself ushered in by delivering beautifully[1] Burns's lines, written during the French Revolution for Miss Fontenelle,[2] and beginning:

> While Europe's eye is fixed on mighty things,
> The fate of Empires and the fall of kings;
> While quacks of State must each produce his plan,
> And even children lisp the Rights of Man;
> Amid this mighty fuss just let me mention,
> The Rights of Women merit some attention.

The women, however, were to wait some three-quarters of a century longer before getting the first representative of their sex into the House of Commons.

"The Rights of Women," as a play, was perhaps rather too Scotch to win the success that it deserved; but it gave Mrs. Stirling a character better suited to her talents than any in which she had been seen for a long time.[3] Her congenial task therein was that of breaking down the bachelor harshness and anti-feminine resolutions of a gruff and crusty old Scotch woman-hater—played, of course, by Maywood—and of making him fall in love with her. This she accomplished by a series of delicately artful attentions, culminating

[1] *Dramatic and Musical Review*, June 10, 1843.

[2] Spoken by her on her benefit night, November 26, 1792.

[3] A French writer upon men and manners in England speaks of her at this time, when under Maywood, as "the best comic actress on the London stage."

in a dish of haggis specially dressed for his dinner—a silent homage to his national taste that induced immediate surrender.

Macready meanwhile, despite his clever company and his various policy, had not fared well financially,[1] as witness the entry in his diary under May 29:

> Spoke to Mr. Keeley upon the reduction of one-third of salary next season; he agreed to it most heartily; to Headson—the same; to Mrs. Stirling—the same.

That lady was continuing, for a time, at the Strand, playing "Ellen" in a burlesque of "The Lady of the Lake," until, not being able to "divest herself of her good looks and sweet smiles," she very properly, and no doubt willingly, resigned the part to Mr. Romer, whose gait, gesture, and ugliness much better adapted him to its crudities, while Maywood—and this is significant—handed over "James V" to that same Wigan, mentioned a few pages back, "a young actor of great versatility and talent, who performs eccentric light comedy, French, Irish, and Scotch characters with extraordinary ability."[2]

Only one other performance of 1843 needs recall, namely, the mono-dramatic trifle, "A Night of Suspense," in which Mrs. Stirling, alone upon the stage, had to interest an audience, for twenty minutes, in her jealous agonies concerning an absent husband, whose knock, at last, announces his return. The actress succeeded completely, and was enthusiastically called.

That autumn saw her again engaged for Drury Lane, and on September 18 she attended, upon the stage of that theatre, a first meeting of performers, among whom were Harley, Meadows, Cooper, Mrs. A. Shaw, and Miss Romer. From the "legitimate" point of view, however, nothing satisfactory was done; Bunn, the manager—with no eyes but for the main chance—being bent upon opera or ballet,

[1] Matthew Arnold, writing of "The Silver King" in 1882, compares the then popularity of the Princess's (see Chapter VII) with the old Princess's of Macready's day. "The house was shabby and dingy and by no means full; there was something melancholy about the whole thing . . . in England the theatre was at that time not in fashion." There you have part of the secret.

[2] *Sunday Times*, July 16, 1843.

rather than drama, while the actors generally were too selfish, apathetic, and disunited to combine effectively in their own interests, supposing even that they knew what those interests were. Upon that point the remaining men of the old school—such as Young, C. Kemble, Liston, Jones, Braham, Stanfield, Grieve and Farley—differed greatly from those of the new.

Macready goes off to America, where he plays to cold, empty, cheerless, inhospitable houses, while the leading musicians and vocalists were making their thousand or two thousand dollars a night.[1]

These happenings bring us to the beginning of 1844. Bunn, by this time, is preparing for "Richard III," with suits of polished plate-armour, specially made in France for the occasion, from which we may suppose that he had no intention whatever to burlesque the tragedy, though the spirit of burlesque was much abroad in those days,[2] the play in question being so treated at the Adelphi during the following February. Bunn, therefore, ought to have known better than to cast Mrs. Stirling, who had recently been playing burlesque at the Strand, for such a part as "Queen Anne." This she essayed, to the "Gloucester" of Charles Kean, and failed completely.

Such a result might have been foreseen. Diderot's well-known and much debated paradox—that an actor does not feel the emotions he portrays—is not generally accepted to-day. Actors do feel those emotions, though in varying degrees of intensity; and most actresses—I was about to write all—feel them more acutely still. They weep themselves moist throughout pathetic parts, and if they are unable to feel the character, they cannot play it convincingly.

Now Mrs. Stirling had shown herself, long before this

[1] *New York Morning Herald.* Macready was sponsored in America by Hackett, father of James K. Hackett, the present distinguished actor, whose impressive performance of "Macbeth" at the Aldwych will be fresh in the minds of play-goers. Mr. Hackett himself told me how strongly the sense of unbroken tradition was with him upon that memorable first night, November 2, 1920.

[2] The once popular spectacle, "Cherry and Fair Star," in which Mrs. Stirling had played at the Pavilion, in 1832, was burlesqued at the Princess's, April 1844.

time, to be a woman of keen psychological penetration, quite capable of observing analytically the finer shades of character in mankind. As "Lady Anne," therefore, she was able to detect at once the simple—though subtly-phrased—wiles of "Gloucester," and to detect them so swiftly that the meeting of the pair, from the first, was no more to her than what Richard calls it at the close—a "keen encounter of our wits"—an exquisitely skilful, and consequently enjoyable, thrust and parry of words. Nor do I believe that any actress possessing a developed sense of humour could readily accept the duologue as anything else. Throughout the scene this fleet-tongued couple are just flirting and coquetting over "the pale ashes of the house of Lancaster." This is one instance, it seems, in which Shakespeare permitted his marvellous command of words and his trained instinct for theatrical situation, to override his sense of the probable.[1] "Lady Anne's" perviousness to flattery is too great to be convincing; and consciousness of that fact made the rôle, for Mrs. Stirling, another stifled study in burlesque. *The Times* critic certainly thought so.[2]

> Mrs. Stirling is an excellent comic actress, and shines also in the domestic pathetic; but she was not herself as "Lady Anne." She seemed as if she would have liked much to make a comedy part of it.

The *Era* of January 28 told the same tale:

> Mrs. Stirling was out of her element in "Lady Anne"; "Thalia" marked her for her own, in spite of all her sabled woes and cambric handkerchief.

Even more direct was the *Dramatic and Musical Review*:

> Mrs. Stirling failed most lamentably as "Lady Anne"; her reproofs were scoldings, her pathos artificial. We are sure she longed to laugh, as we ourselves could scarcely forbear doing.

The comédienne was to appear many times more in Shakespearean tragedy, but never again in that part.

Of her other performances at Drury Lane, that season, I have no record, except in one for May 28, when she

[1] Nevertheless, the scene, well played, is always effective, as those know who saw Miss Dorothy Green and Mr. Baliol Holloway play it recently at Stratford (May 1921).

[2] January 23, 1844.

played "Maria" in "The Daughter of the Regiment," singing all Donizetti's music, which she followed by portraying the heroine, "Black-Eyed Susan," in Douglas Jerrold's once most popular nautical melodrama, first produced at the Surrey, on Whit-Monday, June 8, 1829.[1]

[1] *Douglas Jerrold*, by Walter Jerrold, i. 115.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE PRINCESS'S

1844–47

Engaged by Maddox at the Princess's—Retirement of Mrs. Nisbett—"Don Cæsar de Bazan"—Mrs. Stirling plays "Desdemona"—A comparative failure—Letters of "Theates" to the *Examiner*—The *Examiner's* opinion thereon—Success as "Cordelia"—Reasons for her success—The two parts compared—Another eulogy of Mrs. Stirling at this time—Her "Hermia" and "Katharine"—Strength of the Princess's company—Its members—Masque, "The Ruins of Athens"—Macready in "The King of the Commons"—"Dreams of the Heart"—Irregularities of London managements—Lack of unity in productions—"Margaret" in "A New Way to Pay Old Debts"—"Miss Hardcastle."

AFTER leaving Drury Lane, Mrs. Stirling was at once engaged by Maddox for the Princess's, to supply the place left vacant by Miss Fortescue. Maddox had been running opera for a time, but, owing to difficulties with his singers, had been compelled to return to drama, and had collected a strong company, including, in addition to Mrs. Stirling, James Wallack, Henry Wallack (as Stage Manager), Walter Lacey, and Oxberry.

They opened on October 8, soon after an event that must be recorded here—the withdrawal from the stage of Louisa Cranstoun Nisbett,[1] before her marriage to Sir William Boothby, Controller of the Customs, then in his seventieth year. With her there vanished from theatrical life a ripe actress, of unchallenged supremacy in playing fashionable great ladies, of the then modern school; and one whose beauty, high spirits, and infectious gaiety had conquered many a heart, besides that of Samuel Phelps.[2] Her buoyant spirit and ringing laugh, her swift appreciation of every racy jest, her ready and complete self-abandonment to

[1] Mrs. Nisbett was then in her thirty-third year. She died January 16, 1858, aged forty-six.

[2] See *ante*, p. 72.

each joyous impulse, were as irresistible to an audience then as they would be to-day.

With Mrs. Nisbett's passing, only Mrs. Glover was now left, to challenge Mrs. Stirling's claim to first place among the high comédiennes of her time, though the younger actress herself was probably unable, as yet, to realize the full possibilities that were before her.

On November 13, 1844, she played "Mrs. Lorimer," in "A Widow Bewitched," a slight adaptation from a French Vaudeville, redeemed from insignificance by her acting, and that of Walter Lacey and Granby. After a revival of "The Rent Day"—Douglas Jerrold being not yet in eclipse—she essayed the lead, "Maritana," the gipsy, in a commonplace, fustian melodrama, typical of its time, known as "Don César de Bazan," followed, during February, by "Rebecca," in "The Carbonari," or "The Bride of Parma," a very thin play, concerning which a critic wrote:

> Mrs. Stirling's acting is deserving of great praise. She shows that she fully understands every character that she attempts, though she has not always the art to conceal the art that she uses in portraying it.

Then came a harder task, when the young actress attempted, for the first time, "Desdemona" to Forrest's "Othello," and the "Emilia" of Miss Cushman, the American actress, with whom she played much at this time. Press comments were not, upon the whole, very favourable. A majority of the critics damned her performance with faint praise, as, for example, the *Sunday Times*, which wrote:

> Mrs. Stirling looked very lovely and spoke very sensibly, but she wants tenderness and trustfulness; in the last scene she gave us no idea of the creature who only hopes for life, and will not even attempt to contend for it. Yet what comic actress of the present day could play "Desdemona" with her? Not one.[1]

The verdict was just. Mrs. Stirling, no doubt, was not of gentle enough temperament, nor then skilled enough

[1] Macready said to Fanny Kemble concerning "Desdemona": "There is absolutely nothing to be done with it, nothing; nobody can produce any effect in it; and really 'Emilia's' last scene can be made a great deal more of." Many will agree with him.

in portraying gentleness to make an ideal "Desdemona"; and yet, delving among the journals of the day, and forming a vivid mental picture of the artist's capabilities at that period of her development, I was not altogether satisfied that these press-men were quite awake to her possibilities, nor was I surprised to chance upon the following letters, both of which are very interesting, for their intrinsic critical value, and as showing—what was already in my mind, as a probability—that, to a certain number of intelligent and cultured play-goers of the time, Mrs. Stirling had revealed capacity and promise of which neither the critics nor the public in general were as yet fully conscious.

The Editor of the *Examiner*, in which the letters appeared, did not profess to agree with the writer, but "would not withhold from this clever lady the honest tribute of an intelligent and accomplished critic."

March 8, 1845.

SIR,

As you did not yourself see the performance of "Othello" lately at the Princess's Theatre, will you take from one who did a few observations upon one of the parts, which has not, I think, been praised as much as it deserves. I say nothing of Mr. Forrest, because he deserves no praise at all; or of Miss Cushman, because, though she deserves much, she has received much, and I hope we shall see a great deal more of her. But with regard to Mrs. Stirling's "Desdemona," your brethren of the press do not seem to be aware of its intrinsic merit or of the depth and range of the genius it indicates; and therefore I fear that managers will not be encouraged to bring her forward in the class of characters for which she is fittest—for which, indeed (in our present dearth of actresses) I should myself say that she alone is fit. "Pretty and interesting, though in a part out of her usual line"—"Very pretty, but 'Desdemona' sadly out of her line"—"Pleasing and intelligent, though not aristocratic enough for the daughter of 'Brabantio.'" Such, or such like, are the only notices I find in the newspapers of one of the most feeling, natural, delicate, musical, and truly lady-like performances that I ever saw: and they make me think that newspaper critics do not understand either what Mrs. Stirling's proper line is, or how one of Shakespeare's women ought to be acted. To see her in a part worthy of her is indeed difficult enough; but that is not her fault. Managers have generally provided her with nothing better than empty farce, or trashy melodrama or sickening sentiment; and the British public, seeing her so provided by those who should know best, have

concluded that this is her proper sphere, and that if she occasionally undertakes a character of a higher order, it is but for a shift, and to be treated with indulgence. They know that if they were expected to applaud her, her name would be printed in much larger type; and not being asked to admire, they are well satisfied if they see nothing to blame. Now my own impression is widely different. When I first saw Mrs. Stirling (whom I should tell you, by the way, I have never seen but on the stage) eight or nine years ago, in some worthless character which had no interest, except what her own feeling and imagination imparted to it, I felt that her proper province was Shakespearean comedy. Since that time I have seen her in many parts, and by accident in two or three good ones; and I have always observed that the better the part the better was her acting, so that if my original opinion has undergone any change, it is only in this—that instead of limiting her province to comedy, I am now inclined to limit it only to nature. Her tears are quite as true as her laughter, and I never saw her act otherwise than naturally, except in characters which were not themselves in nature. From her "Constance" in "The Love Chase" I could only infer that she ought to be playing "Beatrice" and "Katharine." Her "Lady Rodolpha" in "The Man of the World" made me wish to see her in "Lady Teazle." Her "Celia" (which I am sure you have not forgotten) proved she would be quite at home in "Rosalind" and "Portia." And now that I have seen her in "Desdemona" nothing shall convince me (short of seeing her with my own eyes fail) that she would not make the best "Ophelia," the best "Cordelia," the best "Viola"—nay, the best "Miranda" and "Perdita"—that our stage can now produce.

This is a bold opinion, which I could not make good without a long criticism . . . but you will perhaps allow me in a second communication to explain briefly what are the peculiar merits which I seem to perceive in her acting, and from which I infer that her proper characters are to be found in Shakespeare.

THEATES.

The second letter followed a week later.

March 15, 1845.

SIR,

According to my promise I will now state shortly the leading qualities which, in my judgment, distinguish Mrs. Stirling from English actresses, and ought specially to appropriate her to Shakespeare.

The first, and though not the greatest, perhaps the most indispensable, is her power of recitation; which though beautifully articulate, and audible in all parts of the house, is as easy and natural as if she were talking in a room; and though ranging at will through every variety of feeling and expression, yet passes so gracefully from change to change that the sense of the rhythm and measure is never lost, always musical, never monotonous.

The second, which is higher and rarer, is the fulness and completeness with which she enters into the spirit of her part: the sense, which never quits her, not only of her own situation, but of all the surrounding scene and circumstance. It is not only while she speaks or is spoken to, that she feels who or where she is; she feels, and feels in every nerve, all that is going on around her. When she was brought into the Senate (in "Othello") her consciousness of the threefold embarrassment of her situation (which by the way I never so fully felt before)—the first meeting with her father, the first publication of her marriage, the awful and unaccustomed presence—expressed itself long before she spoke, in every action, as sensibly as words could do. When she was waiting on the platform for tidings of "Othello," she seemed to be sinking at the sound of the breakers against the bulwarks. She never forgets who are within hearing, nor whether she is under a roof or in the open air.

The third and greatest is what, for want of a better word, I must call the individuality which she imparts to all her personations; the power of perceiving and portraying the undefinable peculiarities of character, which, in Nature and in Shakespeare, make us feel that no two persons are exactly like each other. Try to describe any one woman, and there are a hundred others whom the description will fit as well; yet no one who knows her could mistake her for any one of them. You cannot state in words wherein the difference lies, yet you feel that the difference is essential. So it is in Mrs. Stirling's acting. If she were to play first "Mrs Ford" and then "Mrs. Page"; or "Regan" one night and "Goneril" the next, it would not be like the same person uttering different sets of speeches, but like two distinct persons bearing a strong resemblance to each other—distinct in the basis of the character, resembling in the accidentals. And this I take to be the most Shakespearean quality which a player can possess; an excellence not to be obtained but by a profound conception of the idea, and a perfect sympathy with the feeling of the poet, which implies no small measure of the poetic imagination itself.

Now, Sir, I know nothing whatever of Mrs. Stirling, except as an actress; never heard her voice except on the stage; and it is simply on behalf of judicious play-goers, who like to see Shakespeare worthily acted, that I ask why, if she possesses such qualities as these, she does not appear oftener in parts which bring them into play? Why is she condemned to waste such talents in throwing some human interest into such wretched trash as "Don César de Bazan" or so slight and thin a manufacture as "Carbonaro." The public, perhaps, as critics, are not prepared to rate her as highly as I do; but I observe that, though she does not draw down "repeated plaudits," she receives a great deal of the best kind of applause—the only applause indeed that can truly be called *hearty* (for those "plaudits" express opinion rather than feelings), I mean the pleasure, sympathy, and natural interest with which she is always attended. The public feel

that her acting is agreeable, and I am persuaded that (if they were but told to do so by a received authority) they would very readily think it fine.

THEATES.

Editorial comment upon these letters was to the effect that the writer had allowed too little for the foils that set off Mrs. Stirling's talent. "The lady being natural and intelligent, shines forth among those who surround her—a good deed in a naughty world." This was hard upon her collaborators; yet certain admissions must be made.

Sensible, shrewd, and penetrating though the quoted epistles are, it seems probable that the great admiration of "Theates" for Mrs. Stirling's personality and methods had made him somewhat too sanguine a prophet, nor was his advocacy powerful enough to bring critics or play-goers, as a body, to his side; for when, in the autumn of the same year, she played "Desdemona" again, to the "Othello" of Macready —then by common consent the foremost actor of his day—the reception of her performances by the press was not particularly favourable, the *Examiner* stating bluntly that the company's resources fell short of the drama's requirement. The *Era*, perhaps, best summarized general opinion, when it characterized Mrs. Stirling's "Desdemona" as "soft, sweet, innocent, unsuspicious, and pathetic," but beyond her calibre. "The public have only to thank her for essaying a part that no one else in the establishment could so well portray"—or, in other words, "a good deed in a naughty world" again. *The Times* throws further light upon her comparative failure, in the significant sentence: "It is the representation of a nature that cannot believe a wrong, and treats the approach of one with an unconsciousness that appears almost like levity."

"Levity!" Was "Thalia" still calling? How hard is it for an accomplished young comedy actress, or comedian of any sort, to live down the implied limitation—*Ne sutor ultra crepidam!*

But we must return, for a moment, to the spring of 1845.

"Theates," in the first letter above quoted, had expressed

the conviction that his favourite would make the best "Cordelia" that the stage of her day could produce. She was soon given the opportunity—appearing in that part, in March and April, to Forrest's "Lear." This time there was no failure. "Cordelia" is less exacting a rôle than "Desdemona." She does not demand the same sustained and tragic tension, nor is the actress called upon, as in "Lady Anne," to tempt her sincerity by entering upon dialogue in which, at bottom, the head rules the heart. Titanically tragic though "Lear" be, beyond all that ever was written, or shall be written, the pathos of "Cordelia's" opening scenes remain within the range of domestic drama. The King's "So young and so untender," capped by "Cordelia's" "So young my Lord and true," is the simple yet most noble wit of heart, rather than of head. In "Cordelia," therefore, Mrs. Stirling found herself within her range, and if not completely successful, came nearer to complete success than in any other Shakespearean tragic impersonation. The critics, upon the whole, were well satisfied, as witness the *Era*[1]:

> The "Cordelia" of Mrs. Stirling was exceedingly natural, graceful, and touching. She is a charming as well as a talented actress . . . was loudly called for at the conclusion of the tragedy, and received a well-merited portion of the applause bestowed upon Mr. Forrest.

Upon Mrs. Stirling's intellectual and technical development as an actress, during these seasons at the Princess's, more light is thrown by that sympathetic writer in *Tallis's Magazine*, whom we have already found occasion to quote.

> We remember her "Cordelia" in "Lear," and accounted it, at the time, one of the finest embodiments of character that we had ever witnessed. The sweetness of her intonation, the beauty of her person, the stateliness of her demeanour, and the grace of her action, all qualified Mrs. Stirling for the representation of this, the loveliest character in dramatic poetry. It was clear from her attitudes that Mrs. Stirling had begun to study the statuesque; and we perceived in the fact an evidence that she was devoted to her profession in earnest, ambitious of its honours, and in a fair way to win them. It was now, too, that criticism made her the object of special remark; and general hopes were entertained that in Mrs. Stirling we possessed

[1] March 9, 1845.

an actress capable of doing extraordinary things, when suitable demands should be made upon her talents. . . . We have singled out "Cordelia" for particular remark; but in "Rosalind,"[1] "Portia," and "Desdemona" she achieved equal success, and in all her acting blended pathos with power.[2]

In "Hermia," too, she succeeded admirably, as one would have supposed. The *Musical and Dramatic Review* (July 18, 1846), described this as one of her most meritorious performances, while the *Examiner* (April 10, 1847) praised her thus:

It was pleasant to see Mrs. Stirling deliver the lovely part of "Hermia." Whatever her position as an actress, as an elocutionist she was always in the front rank.

Almost hyperbolic is the *Theatrical Times* of April 10, 1847:

Compton and Mrs. Stirling were excellent in "Bottom" and "Hermia." Probably no performer alive could have at all surpassed them. "Hermia" is a small part, but the grace and poetic feeling of the actress raised its importance. Mrs. Stirling is the best genteel actress we have, and her every movement is easy as her every accent is delightful. Nature might well smile upon her to see her own image in such a form, and art almost despair to find a grace beyond her reach.

Into all the details of the heavy work done by her during those busy years at the Princess's, we have no space to enter. The varied list of her parts can be read at the end of this book. A few of them only we will recall.

In May 1845 was put on "The Chevalier de St. George," from the French original of the same name, played first about 1840 by Lafont at the Théâtre des Variétés; here, at the Princess's, by Wallack, who showed great breadth and vigour in the part."

The "Comtesse de Presle" was played with extraordinary taste and elegance by Mrs. Stirling. There was an indescribable combination of coquetry, gaiety, and pathos in her acting that pleased us exceedingly.[3]

[1] "Rosalind" was probably her favourite Shakespearean part. See Miss Mary Anderson's recollections of Mrs. Stirling in the last chapter of this book.

[2] Her other Shakespearean parts at the Princess's were "Beatrice," October 28, 1845, to Wallack's "Benedick"; "Rosalind," November 11, 1845; "Mrs. Ford," July 1, 1847; "Hermia," April 5, 1847.

[3] *Sunday Times*, May 25, 1845.

In "Katharine and Petruchio" [1] also, and "Advice to Husbands," she did very well. Concerning the latter the same critic writes:

We have rarely seen a little piece played with more truth and feeling than this was by Mr. James Vining, Mr. Granby, and Mrs. Stirling—more particularly the latter, who threw into the character of "Mrs. Trevor" a degree of quiet pathos and womanly tenderness which quite equalled, if it did not surpass, anything of the kind we have hitherto witnessed in her performances.

The company, as a whole, was very strong. Besides Macready, Wallack himself was an actor of high repute, whether in tragedy or comedy; Leigh Murray, a promising young player in juvenile tragedy; James Vining, excellent in seconds and in juveniles, serious or humorous; R. Roxby, clever in light and eccentric comedy; Walton, good in heavy business; Granby, a favourite in stout and plethoric citizens and old men; Oxbery, in quaint boys and serving-men; and Compton, the best Shakespearean clown upon the English stage. Charles Mathews and Mme. Vestris were also engaged. One leading lady was Miss Emma Stanley, while in Mrs. Stirling the management possessed an actress "able to assume almost any character in the range of the drama—with absolute excellence in many, and taste, judgment, and artistic feeling in all."

With such a wealth of talent at his command, it seems strange that Maddox should ever have brought himself to court almost certain failure, by such a production as "The Ruins of Athens," adapted from Kotzebue's "Masque," that had been first produced at Pesth. It was altogether a queer affair, cited here only as an example of the extraordinary lapses of judgment of which every manager, almost, at one time or another, is guilty. Maddox, apparently, had endeavoured to enliven the dreary bombast of the classical portion of the show with a national procession, suggested,

[1] "Mrs. Stirling fully understands her author; she is the veritable 'Katharine'; her scornful laugh, her biting retorts, and her shrewish soliloquy were perfect nature; nor does she stop here; she is not tamed at once, but fights her ground inch by inch. In that part of the play in which she perforce obeys 'Petruchio,' in changing sun for moon, her compliance was such as 'Katharine's' ought to be—angry, acid, and forced; nor does 'Petruchio' gain a triumph until Mrs. Stirling completed hers in the last act." *Theatrical Times*, October 28, 1848.

said one of the press critics, "by that stunning work of art, the Stratford Jubilee, exhibited in the window of Mr. Grossmith's soap-shop, at the corner of Wellington Street, Strand."

During the course of the proceedings, "Mercury," allotted to Mrs. Stirling, delivered a popular lecture upon British glory—with a side kick at America—and some highly seasoned adulation for the Duke of Wellington, whose statue politely popped up through a trap door, to receive the compliment, and then popped down again, while afterwards a procession marched round the stage, carrying banners, on which were written the titles of Shakespeare's plays. These puerilities were a reversion to the type of spectacle extant *circa* 1832, when at Drury Lane, as an after-piece, you would see the characters of Walter Scott's works grouped about the poet's bust and empty chair, in his study at Abbotsford; "concluding with a grand scenic apotheosis of the Minstrel of the North!"

This masque was followed by a comedy, equally absurd, "The Dreamer,"

in which Mrs. Stirling played a very bad part with great humour, which is much to her credit, and looked exceedingly beautiful, for which we do not praise her, as it is impossible for her to look otherwise.[1]

Upon only two more of these performances, during 1846 and 1847, will we comment. The first is a play with some pretension to literary merit, and one that brought to its author a genuine, though temporary, celebrity—"The King of the Commons," by the Rev. James White, in which Macready, as "King James V[2] of Scotland," had some noble and harmonious lines to speak.

> What to hear?—
> His threats, and worse than threats—his patronage?
> As if we stooped our sovran crown, or held it
> As Vassal from the greatest king alive.
> No, we are poor—I know we are poor, my lords;

[1] *Sunday Times*, March 22, 1846.

[2] Macready wrote in his diary: "Acted 'King James' . . . very fairly considering all things. Was called and very warmly received." May 20, 1846.

Our realm is but a niggard in its soil,
And the fat fields of England wave their crops
In richer dalliance with the autumn winds
Than our bleak plains; but from our rugged dells
Springs a far richer harvest—gallant hearts,
Stout hands, and courage that would think foul scorn
To quail before the face of mortal man.

The play, "though not so successful as the big placards on the advertising van would have led one to suppose," had a certain vogue, and, according to the *Examiner*, showed Macready at his best, because

it afforded him opportunity in those masterly and delicate touches of portraiture which are turned to good account by a great actor, but are scarcely done justice to in criticism. One must see a portrait by Titian or Holbein. Such is Macready's "James V." Mrs. Stirling's part of "Madeline Weir" was very weak.

An eccentric management indeed! A few weeks before playing "Hermia," in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Maddox's leading lady is condemned to attempt "Hermine," in "Dreams of the Heart," which, according to the *Sunday Times*, was a "shabby, vulgar compound of nonsense and immorality" hashed up from a French piece entitled "Mesmerism," and lustily hissed by the audience almost from beginning to end, as worthy only of Bartholomew Fair. Nothing but Mrs. Stirling's acting saved it from being hooted from the stage,

and the only natural and amusing incident in the performance was the entry of a supernumerary actor, in the shape of a rough, ugly little brown cur, in one of the most pathetic scenes of the drama, who refused to quit the stage, although poked at from the orchestra, whistled to from the coulisses, pelted from the flies, until having satisfied himself by a general survey of the house, and paid a passing tribute to one of the wings, he trotted off amid the only genuine applause we heard during the evening.

Taken altogether, and despite the presence of so many players of ability, the London drama was in rather a bad way. By this time, including the French theatre at St James's, there were nineteen theatrical and musical houses open in London, in addition to the Saloons—which were, by

licence, theatres—and a number of concert rooms also. The supply somewhat exceeded the demand, and many prominent actors, including Kean, Macready, and Wallack, had, at one time or another, been induced to cross the Atlantic. Of those named, only two—Kean and Macready—could claim public confidence, as heads of a National Theatre. Among many causes of the decline, a principal one was the rentals, which—though small when compared with the figures of to-day—were then considered exorbitant. Elliston, at one time, was giving £11,000 a year for Drury Lane; and £25 to £30 a week was paid for the tiny Strand. Proprietors, too, were often at fault in letting deliberately to men of straw, hoping thereby to be in a position to enforce better terms, and, if necessary, to obtain ejectment more easily. Management—excepting always Macready's—was often very loose. Spirits were sold without a licence; common informers being bribed to keep silence. There was chicanery in the booking of seats; defalcations by under-paid doorkeepers; managers' orders sold in Holywell Street, and so forth. Moreover, there were too many of the manager's friends visible behind the scenes—gentlemen who, knowing little, talked more than they knew. To the lower-class houses demi-mondaines were admitted free, as an additional attraction.

Rehearsals were often very badly conducted. Comparatively little work was done at home, and there was too much reading upon the stage. Seldom was there enough rehearsal with the scenery set—the result being that the manager was unable properly to judge beforehand of the effect of a piece; and actors, on the first night, would make ludicrous mistakes, such as leaning against the walls of distant castles. The dressing, also, was frequently inappropriate. Mme. Vestris, in the character of a soubrette, wears white satin, decked with diamonds of great value, while her mistress treads the stage in muslin. "Alfred Jingle," penniless and starving, sports, at the Strand Theatre, a handsome brooch and a diamond ring; and even so experienced an actress as Mrs. Jordan is seen in the "Country Girl" in a wig stuck to the side of her head with a substance that melted visibly during the bustle of the play. There

were too many sloppy revivals, dressed in old clothes; too much of the "I-have-played-it-fifty-times-and-know-it-inside-out" sort of attitude. Ill-feeling was fostered among the players by the bad managerial habit of putting up, in the Green Room, the names of the original cast; so that every one knew who had been asked first for any particular part. Only little by little were such stage abuses to be put an end to, and a production at last conceived as a complete and harmonious whole.

Yet, amid all these mistakes, failures, infelicities, and exasperations, our actress was unremittingly at work, increasing daily her technical efficiency, and charming many a play-goer, and not a few of the critics also. In November 1846, for example, she played "Margaret," in "A New Way to Pay Old Debts," to the "Sir Giles" of an American actor, Scott, in one of Edmund Kean's most tempestuous parts. The *Theatrical Times* (November 26) writes:

> The feminine delicacy, the winning grace, the ease, the nature, the polish, of charming Mrs. Stirling, in "Margaret," are worthy of the best days of the drama. We like sometimes to cast off our critical glasses, and be children again in the enjoyment of the mimic scene; and it is impossible to be a critic when this actress is before one. She is entirely English in her style, and yet we think she must have studied in the French School of Art—she is so entirely free from mannerism and affectation. She has some points of resemblance to Rose Chêri,[1] but is superior to her. She realizes the exquisite idea in "Episychidion," without any hyperbole—"A metaphor of youth and spring and morning."

[1] In *The Stage As It Is*, by Dramaticus, published in 1847, the writer, when mentioning Julia Bennett, says: "We frankly confess we don't like her half as well as Mrs. Stirling, whom we regard as a true artist, the Rose Chéri of our stage—graceful and intellectual."

Rose Chéri (Rose Marie Cizos Montigny), born October 27, 1824, began playing, at five years old, in her father's troupe, throughout central France and Brittany. During the forties she played at the Gymnase, Paris, in works by Scribe, Bayard, A. Dumas Fils, Emile Augier, and others; and married Lemoine Montigny, the Director of that theatre. Among her principal rôles were the leads in "Le Collier de Perles," "Manon Lescaut," "Mariage de Victorine," "Le Pour et le Contre," "Le Gendre de M. Poirier," "Le Demi-Monde," and "Les Pattes de Mouche." Rose Chéri had great personal charm, and a natural, flexible talent that fitted her alike for comedy or serious drama. Dumas Fils said of her: "C'est la seule actrice à laquelle les femmes du monde accordent le droit de les représenter."

And of her "Miss Hardcastle," in "She Stoops to Conquer," thus:

Mrs. Stirling was all that could possibly be desired by the most fastidious in "Miss Hardcastle." We hardly know of an actress on the boards so very equal as she is. Mrs. Keeley[1] has more spirit, intensity, and point, but then Mrs. Stirling possesses personal attractions, with a glad smile that steals like sunshine into the heart and warms it, a clear bell-like voice, and an ease and airy lightness that leave all rivalry behind.

[1] Mrs. Keeley was considered by many to be the most intense performer then upon the boards.

CHAPTER VIII

LYCEUM AND OLYMPIC

1847–49

Engaged by Mme. Vestris at the Lyceum—Mme. Vestris as a performer—Mrs. Stirling plays "Mrs. Bracegirdle" in "The Tragedy Queen"—The original Mrs. Bracegirdle—Macready's Benefit Performance at Drury Lane—His position on our stage—Mrs. Stirling engaged with Leigh Murray at Olympic—"Laura Leeson" in "Time Tries All"—Complete success at last—The place of these plays in the evolution of our modern theatre—Leigh Murray as man and actor—"Pauline" in "The Lady of Lyons"—Mrs. Stirling's popularity at the Olympic—Her success in "Cousin Cherry"—Destruction of the Olympic by fire.

By midsummer, 1847, Mrs. Stirling's long spell of work at the Princess's had come to an end, when the actress, after a holiday, was at once engaged by Mme. Vestris, who had taken the Lyceum for the autumn season.[1]

Mme. Vestris (Mrs. Charles Mathews) had probably been the first female lessee of an English theatre, when she had opened the Olympic, in January 1831. Technically but a third-rate actress, this lady possessed great physical charm, and a contralto voice so rich in quality that, had its owner been endowed also with the necessary musical patience and industry, she might well have queened it in Italian opera. Though never attaining to that giddy eminence, Mrs. Mathews remained, nevertheless, without an equal, as a singer of songs upon the stage, and was a general favourite, exploiting recklessly her gifts of archness, fascination, and *mutinerie*, together with a certain careless acceptance of homage, a prettily assumed simplicity, and a confidential appeal to an audience, that made her the spoiled darling of her public. The daring of her costumes added also to her vogue among many play-goers, as did

[1] Mme. Vestris had done good work for the drama, in being the first to introduce a rational measure of realism into her drawing-room settings.

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also her playfulness, in which she was excelled by no actress upon the stage, excepting only Mrs. Nisbett.

Such, in brief, was the woman beneath whose flag Mrs. Stirling now found herself enrolled, opening, on October 18, 1847, as "Mary of Denmark" in "The Two Queens," with Harley and Charles Selby also in the cast. The play ran until October 30; November seems to have been idle, and, on December 7, Mrs. Stirling takes part in a memorable performance, the "Shakespeare Night," at Covent Garden, given to raise funds for the purchase of Shakespeare's house at Stratford. Selections were acted from seven plays, Mrs. Stirling's contribution being "Mrs. Ford," always one of her best parts.

Then came the first of those "actress" impersonations, her excellence in which was, in itself, a proof of the thoroughness of her professional attainment. "Mrs. Bracegirdle" in "The Tragedy Queen"—adapted by John Oxenford from the French "Tiridate," in which Mme. Fargeuil had represented the tragédienne, Dumesnil—gave her opportunity to impersonate, before the public, one of her most famous predecessors upon the stage; Oxenford having substituted, for the French heroine, Mrs. Bracegirdle, the contemporary of Congreve, whom rumour—notwithstanding the protests of Colley Cibber—had persisted in making the dramatist's wife, by a private marriage.

Antony Ashton says of her[1]:

> She was of a lovely height, with dark brown hair and eyebrows, black, sparkling eyes, a fresh blushy complexion; and whenever she exerted herself she had an involuntary flushing in her breast, neck and face, having continuously a cheerful aspect, and a fine set of even white teeth, never making an exit but that she left the audience in an imitation of her pleasing countenance.

Cibber adds "that it was even a fashion among the gay and young to have a taste or tendre for Mrs. Bracegirdle," that other dramatists made their private court to her in fictitious characters; and further that "if anything could excuse that desperate extravagance of love, that almost frantic passion of Lee's 'Alexander the Great,' it must have been when Mrs. Bracegirdle was his 'Statira.'"

[1] "A Brief Supplement," etc.—i.e. to Colley Cibber's *Lives o' the Actors.*

Part of Mrs. Stirling's task was precisely, by reciting from that "Statira," so to work upon an old man's feelings as to bring the drama to a happy conclusion. This, it seems, she successfully accomplished, showing great versatility of talent in the declamatory dignity of the stage queen, the assumed vulgarity of the actress, and the vivacity and tenderness of the woman in her natural character.

After the conclusion of the Lyceum engagement, which seems to have come to an end with the run of "A Happy Family"—with Mme. Vestris, Mathews, Buckstone and Harley also in the cast—I lose sight of her until July, when she reappears behind the scenes at Drury Lane, walking on, or taking a small part, upon the occasion of Macready's benefit performance, July 10, 1848, previous to his departure for America.

The evening was a compliment to the great actor, almost without precedent in the later history of the stage. The Queen had commanded the play, and visited the theatre in state. The Queen Dowager, and other members of the Royal Family, were also present, the building being thronged with persons distinguished in the public life of the day, and in the higher branches of literature and of art. Not since the great assembly of rank and fashion that had gathered to do honour to Garrick,[1] had such a tribute of respect and admiration been offered to any English actor. For Macready, as the *Examiner* had written,[2] was not merely the greatest English actor of his time, he represented, in its poetical and national aspects, a stage that, by his own private character, as well as by his own public achievements, he had uplifted and exalted. As our leading tragedian he was to be succeeded ultimately by Samuel Phelps; but, with all due recognition of Phelps' good work for the theatre—especially at Sadler's Wells—no man of Macready's calibre was to appear until Henry Irving took the vacant place at the head of our national drama. It is interesting to note that the play chosen by Queen Victoria, upon that occasion, was "Henry VIII," the "Cardinal" being one of Macready's best representations,

[1] His farewell appearance June 10, 1776, as "Don Felix" in 'The Wonder."

[2] October 18, 1845.

as it was also in the case of Henry Irving. Both actors were great enough to interpret worthily the grandeur and nobility of the character.[1]

From "Henry VIII," with Macready, at Drury Lane, to Leigh Murray's company, with light comedy, at the Olympic, seems something of a descent; but to that little theatre, then standing in Wych Street, our story now takes us.

It was not then a prosperous theatre. Indeed, it had fallen upon evil days, and was near its end; yet there was in store for it a last burst of success, of which Mrs. Stirling was to be one of the most potent causes. After some sixteen years of laborious striving, with many failures, and many set-backs, her patience and industry are, at last, to be rewarded. She has reached the period of her life to which, in later years, she was to look back, as the most pleasant and successful of her long and arduous career—these coming seasons at the old and new Olympic, and the New Strand.

Quite unpretentious was Courtnay's little play—taken from a story in the *Family Herald*—"Time Tries All,"[2] with which, as "Laura Leeson," her first appearance at the Olympic ushered in those days of complete success. It was nothing more than a neatly written, simple, sentimental, domestic comedy, concerning a wilful young heroine, who rejects her true lover, and drives him abroad, only to discover —not too late, of course—that he is, after all, the man of her mind. There was nothing striking in dialogue or situation—only ease, elegance, and such negative virtue as enabled the actress, and actors too, so to imbue the simple scenes with truth, that "though you are untouched by any reading of the lines," when Mrs. Stirling gave the author to the public, bearded men were seen crying. This is a triumph of art, of which only great players are capable; and few there are to-day who can do it. Not many then were so endowed. Mrs. Stirling was one of them; another

[1] Miss Ellen Terry recently told the writer that she considered "Wolsey" to be Henry Irving's best part.

[2] Courtnay had succeeded Douglas Jerrold as the tame playwright of the Surrey.

was Macready, whose genius also could breathe truth and vitality, even into figures so artificial as "Werner" and "Virginius."

Concerning "Laura Leeson" the press were more than usually enthusiastic, one of the most laudatory and pertinent critiques being that of the *Era*,[1] which ran:

> Mrs. Stirling hits off the bewitching and wayward tormentor to the life. She is too beautiful to be condemned; too clever to be contradicted . . . the drawing lesson she gives to her lover, while ignorant of the obligation she is under to him, is an inimitable piece of acting.

But there was more in "Laura Leeson's" success than just that. This little comedy, and one or two others that were to follow it, are landmarks, not merely in Mrs. Stirling's career, but—regarded from the right point of view—in the history of nineteenth-century drama. We have discussed, in a previous chapter, the impossibility in the theatre, as elsewhere, of putting new wine into old bottles. For the successful establishment of the more developed stage, we need always those long initiations. Plays, players, and audiences must be wrought, little by little, towards the change; and I do not think that we shall be far from the truth if, even in such simple plays as "Time Tries All," so perfectly acted, with all the ease and facility of great art, we claim to see the earliest stilly dawn of the newer and more natural style, that, beginning definitely with the comedies of Robertson, and the stage art of the Bancrofts, was to come to fruition in the last quarter of the century.

Whatever their place or importance in the history of the stage, these unpretentious comedies were certainly popular successes, and that success was due first to the skill of Mrs. Stirling, and in part also to the talent of Leigh Murray, who, after being first stage manager to Stocqueler, had become sole manager of the Olympic, and was now responsible for the theatrical policy that introduced such happy trifles as "Time Tries All," and "First Champagne."

Leigh Murray, as an actor, was generally considered to be the best representative of juveniles then upon the stage.

[1] September 10, 1848.

But he was more than that word conveys ; he was a versatile player, well practised in catching the distinctive and salient points of character, excellent in parts, calling for a patois or a foreign accent, and clever at hitting off, with evident gusto, any individual peculiarity. The man was no mere imitator. He could personate and portray. His merits were his own, and, like those of some plays he favoured, they were partly negative, in that he avoided carefully too much conventionality and mannerism. Murray was a scholar and a gentleman,[1] and, in consequence, a friend of Macready.

Altogether we may regard him as a careful, zealous, energetic, sincere, and essentially natural actor, of the newer school, conforming thoroughly with the newer type of play he introduced. His company liked him, were on good terms with him, and appreciated his work, as proved by the presentation of a silver tankard to their chief, at the close of the season.

Of the plays written during the first half of the nineteenth century, very few remain in the permanent repertoires of our stage. One drama, at least, however, has come near to doing so, namely Bulwer's "The Lady of Lyons," which, though technically inferior to the same author's "Money," appealed more to the public taste, and, being much more easily put on, has long been a stand-by for theatrical benefit matinées. Nor is it yet quite extinct, for Mr. F. J. Nettlefold courageously, though unsuccessfully, revived it at the Scala, during the autumn of 1919. Despite its obvious crudities, the drama has two acting parts always alluring to players endowed with the breadth of style essential to their portrayal. From "Laura Leeson," wayward and bewitching, Mrs. Stirling passed to "Pauline," the proud and passionate, with Leigh Murray as "Claude." This she followed with the lead in "Patronage," a play adapted from a French comedy, "La Protégée sans le Savior" : then came "Katharine" again, in "Katharine and Petruchia" —"played as though the part were written for her"—

[1] My mother said of him : "A most charming and gentlemanly actor." He was a frequent visitor at my grandmother's house, Arundel Street, Strand.

"Lucille," in a sentimental domestic drama, also, as usual, from the French. It was Mrs. Keeley's old character, but it suited Mrs. Stirling, who, according to the *Era*, was exceedingly natural and finely impassioned.

Despite the ephemeral quality of the majority of her rôles, the leading lady at the Olympic was enhancing her reputation with every week, and adding greatly to her popularity. Of her next performance, "Julia Amor," in a farce, "Love and Charity," the critic of the *Era* writes :[1]

> This lady has become, and deservedly so, an enormous favourite here, as she is everywhere. Indeed, we know not any whom the lessee could have selected more capable of sustaining by her talent the reputation of the theatre in such style of pieces.

Two qualities of her acting the work she was now doing enabled her fully to display. We mean tenderness—the tenderness that some had failed to see in her "Desdemona"—and vivacity ; and in no rôle undertaken by her throughout her career did that second quality find more scope than in her last and greatest success at the Olympic, as "Cousin Cherry." The play—adapted from a French Vaudeville, "Le Moulin à Paroles"—was put on, no doubt, for the express purpose of exploiting that side of Mrs. Stirling's talent ; and it succeeded admirably well. "Cousin Cherry" is the belle of the village, and its shining light, the acknowledged authority upon all matters, and upon every topic, whether sacred, secular, social, or political. She is the lady oracle of the district, to whose mandates all pay the most perfect obedience, and before whose shrine all bow in humble submission. She is, moreover, the accredited and undisputed dictatress upon the family affairs of the Primroses, concerning which she is inordinately inquisitive, and extravagantly loquacious ; her merry little tongue resting never from morning till night.

But her tongue having an edge, as well as a facility, she begins, at last, by force of circumstance, to realize that her endless prattle arouses at least as much dislike as admiration. This discovery brings about the best situation in the play, when, after a vain attempt, on the damsel's

[1] November 19, 1848.

part, to stem the torrent of her words, her volubility, in the end, breaks down all obstacles, and sweeps on the stronger for its check.

Such a part gave opportunities to an actress of the Stirling type; and she took them. The *Era* described her best.

> To say that Mrs. Stirling was a charming representative of "Cousin Cherry" would be only faint praise; the arch vivacity and *naïveté* she threw into the part, the sparkling *espièglerie* with which she invested the vain, capricious, yet kind-hearted coquette, were beyond all praise: naturally truthful throughout, we saw, not Mrs. Stirling, but, in "Cousin Cherry," a relative that would thaw the heart of the most inflexible stoic that ever existed.

Let the reader note that "not Mrs. Stirling." As Charles Reade was to observe later,[1] the actress had learned the great importance to an impersonation, of first appearing before the audience, not as a star performer, but in the character to be portrayed [2]—a merit which, upon this occasion, did not escape the critic of the *Theatrical Times*.[3]

> In "Cousin Cherry" Mrs. Stirling comes on in her own delightful way, pulling a greyhound with her, and setting all the house at once in good humour.

Many others praised her rattling vivacity; and forty-seven years later, in an obituary notice of Lady Gregory, —as she had become—*The Times*[4] referred to her engagement at the Olympic, as being made important by her acting in this part.

Then, on Thursday, March 29, 1849, occurred a disaster all too common in theatrical annals—the passing of a playhouse in fire. Under a cloud—though not of smoke—the Olympic had been almost continuously since its erection, some fifty years before, by that enterprising theatrical speculator, Philip Astley, upon a site formerly occupied by the mansion of the Earl of Craven, husband of Elizabeth, titular Queen of Bohemia—and only sister to Charles I—who, returning to England at the Restoration, was then privately married to the Earl.

[1] See *infra*, p. 134.
[2] Lucien Guitry possesses this faculty in a very high degree.
[3] November 25, 1848. [4] December 31, 1895.

Obscurely placed in Wych Street, between Craven Buildings and Newcastle Street, its occupiers had always struggled ineffectually to make their house rank in fashion and popularity with other West-End theatres. All had failed, excepting only Elliston, round about 1813, and Mme. Vestris, from 1830-39. The majority of its managements —until Spicer and Davidson took it in 1847—had been of poor quality, from the dramatic standpoint; and its audiences, from time to time, had been regaled with musical, equestrian, and even pugilistic entertainment. Now, in a golden sunset of prosperity, the old Olympic was to pass.

At half-past five upon that Thursday afternoon, Mrs. Stirling's husband, Edward Stirling, the stage-manager, was standing near the wings. The gas-fitter was trying the lights on the prompt side, when—as is supposed—the curtain of cotton velvet, lined with calico, which had not been properly festooned up out of the way, was blown on to the light, and immediately caught fire. Stirling did what he could, with buckets of water; but the flames spread with great rapidity, and though the dresses for the night were saved, the theatre, in a few hours, was completely destroyed, and the company rendered professionally homeless.

The Farrens were then holding an agreement for the Olympic Theatre, so Mrs. Stirling took service under Henry Farren at the New Strand, to which house Leigh Murray accompanied her. Its fallen fortunes they were jointly to assist in raising, as they had raised those of the old Olympic. There, from June to September, she appeared in four or more different plays, of which the two most noteworthy were "Hearts are Trumps," by Mark Lemon, and "Where there's a Will there's A Way," by J. M. Morton, in which the newcomer played "Princess Francesca."

In a very short time the public began to render justice to the talents of the company at the Strand, now "a hotbed in which farces sprang up like mushrooms," to endure in general only for a mushroom space.

It was not to be all farce, however, for, after a short illness, during which her parts were taken by Miss Gray and Mrs. Leigh Murray, there followed an event of great importance in Mrs. Stirling's theatrical career.

CHAPTER IX

"ADRIENNE LECOUVREUR"

1849

Adrienne Lecouvreur," Mrs. Stirling's best tragic part—Rachel in the rôle—Oxenford's version put on by the Farrens at the Strand—Difficulties of an English rendering—Quotations from French classics unfamiliar to an English audience—Mrs. Stirling's qualifications for "Adrienne"—Favourable press comments—Rachel plays "Adrienne" at St. James's—The two performances compared—"Miss Hardcastle"—"Iolanthe" in "King René's Daughter"—Great success in this poetical play.

On October 9, 1849, Mrs. Stirling played, for the first time, the part that, in after years, she was to look upon as her best in tragedy, and would sometimes speak of as, in many respects, the best performance of her life. Artists often say of themselves—and it is often said of them—that they are incapable of passing sound judgment upon their own endeavours. Not everyone will accept the limitation as true; but in the case of executive performers generally—painters, sculptors, actors, and musicians—it is certain that a majority—probably a large majority—possess the analytical skill combined with power of detachment enough to enable them to gauge, as well as any other critic, the quality of their own work. Macready could do so, and, in the diary, passes upon his own performances every variety of critical judgment, from complete condemnation, through indifference, to unstinted praise. Not public applause only, nor favourable press comment, but the artist's own conscience, is the *alter ego* that can stand aloof, and appraise judicially the value of his achievement. And the verdict of posterity, at last, will, in general, concur with his own.

Edmund Kean knew that the third act of "Othello" was

his "most satisfactory performance"; and posterity has endorsed that judgment. Mrs. Stirling thought that her best *serious* work was done in "Adrienne Lecouvreur,"[1] and the probabilities are that she was right.

Even to those who, like the writer, never saw Mrs. Stirling upon the stage, a reason for her legitimate pride in this performance of "Adrienne" is not far to seek. When she took up the part in London, the English actress, if not competing, was directly challenging comparison with the leading tragédienne of the day, perhaps of all time, Mdlle. Rachel,[2] for whom the play was written, whose favourite rôle it became, and to whose genius its success was largely due.

"Adrienne Lecouvreur," considered from our modern point of view, is no masterpiece. It is crude in character-drawing, stagey, and artificial to the last degree; but, constructed with all Scribe's technical deftness, it tells—as do the highly coloured dramas of his successor, Sardou—an intensely dramatic tale of pride and passion, that provides powerful acting scenes, for players competent to take advantage of them.

The French version, by Scribe and Legouvé, was played, for the first time, at the Théâtre Français, on April 14, 1849,

[1] Adrienne Lecouvreur, the celebrated French tragédienne and intimate friend of Voltaire, made her first appearance at the Comédie Française, May 14, 1717, when in her twenty-seventh year. She died suddenly, on March 17, 1780, two days after playing the part of "Jocaste." Rumour accounted for her death by asserting that, while playing "Phèdre," Adrienne saw, one night, in a box, the Duchesse de Bouillon, a lady known to be intimate with Maurice, Comte de Saxe, whom Adrienne loved and had befriended. The actress, stung by jealousy, recited certain of her lines to the Duchess, when the audience, by their clamour, showed that they understood the allusion. The Duchess revenged herself by poisoning Adrienne. Upon this legend, which is supported by no evidence whatever, is based the plot of both French and English versions of the drama.

[2] Rachel, born in 1820, was then twenty-nine years old, and at the height of her fame. "Adrienne Lecouvreur" was her first prose part, and the first step out of her classical repertoire. She played it for the first time at the Théâtre Français, April 14, 1849. Her last appearance in it was at Charleston, U.S.A., on December 17, 1856, when she was already mortally ill. She died at Cannet, near Cannes, January 3, 1858. "Adrienne" is the only part devised for her that has kept a place in the theatre. The writer saw it billed at Nantes, May 1920.

Mme. Sarah Bernhardt has also made the part her own, but Matthew Arnold, writing in 1879, expresses the opinion that Rachel is intellectually far above Bernhardt. "She began almost where Mdlle. Sarah Bernhardt ended." Will posterity endorse that verdict?

with Rachel, then at the height of her fame, in the title part. Six months later, while the strong emotions roused by Rachel's performance were yet fresh in public memory, the Farrens played their coup. They billed "The Reigning Favourite,"[1] an English version of "Adrienne," with Mrs. Stirling in Rachel's part. Oxenford, as translator and adapter, was a sound choice. He had done "The Tragedy Queen" (Mrs. Bracegirdle) for Mrs. Stirling at the Lyceum, and was experienced at such work. In this instance also he acquitted himself well, maintained the play at a reasonably high standard of literature and poetry, and, by compressing his version, greatly aided the English actress's chances of success, if, as I suppose, lack of power to sustain was one of her weaknesses in tragic work.

Yet there still remained many and grave disadvantages, from which there was no escape for any English rendering of the play—this one, in particular, that the French authors had cleverly woven into the fabric of "Adrienne's" rôle passages from the French classics, perfectly familiar, and therefore welcome, to Parisian audiences, but robbed of half their significance in a London theatre. In Act II, for example, occurs a charming passage between the lovers, when "Maurice" produces the bullet-pierced copy of La Fontaine's fables, that "Adrienne" had given him, whereby to improve his scanty knowledge of her language.

ADRIENNE. Et ce petit exemplaire de La Fontaine, que je vous avais donné en partant ?

MAURICE. Il ne m'a jamais quitté . . . il était là, toujours là . . . à telles enseignes qu'il m'a sauvé d'une balle dont il a gardé l'empreinte. Voyez plutot !

ADRIENNE. Et vous l'avez lu ?

MAURICE. Ma foi, non.

ADRIENNE. Pas même la fable des deux pigeons, que je vous avais recommandée ?

MAURICE. C'est vrai . . . mais pardonnez moi, ce n'est qu'une fable.

[1] An earlier English adaptation had been made by Theodore Martin, in which Helen Faucit, Lady Martin, appeared as "Adrienne," at Manchester, with great success. Sir Theodore Martin, in his biography of Helen Faucit, does not mention Mrs. Stirling, saying merely that Rachel "had hitherto been identified with the part," p. 233.

ADRIENNE (*d'un air de reproche*). Une fable! vous ne voyez là qu'une fable?

(*récitant*) "Deux pigeons s'aimaient . . .

(*avec expression*) d'amour tendre."

MAURICE. Comme nous!

ADRIENNE. "L'un d'eux, s'ennuyant au logis,
Fut assez fou pour entreprendre
Un voyage en lointain pays."

MAURICE. Comme moi!

ADRIENNE. "L'autre lui dit: Qu'allez-vous faire?
Voulez vous quitter vôtre frère?
L'absence est le plus grand des maux.
Non pas pour vous, cruel!"

MAURICE. Est-ce qu'il y a cela?

ADRIENNE (*continuant*). "Hélas! dirai-je, il pleut!
Mon frère a-t-il tout ce q'il veut,
Bon souper, bon gite, et le reste?"

MAURICE (*vivement*). Le reste! Ah! après? après?

ADRIENNE (*souriant*). Après? . . . (*avec finesse*) Ah! cela vous interesse donc, Monsieur?

Now all this is tender and charming, even to an English ear; but it was doubly beautiful, and doubly significant, to an audience who had read that same fable to their children, or, as children, had heard it read to them. As Rachel spoke those words, with exquisite grace and simplicity, they possessed, henceforth, a fuller meaning in all French ears upon whom they fell; but upon an English audience, in translation, they were wellnigh lost.

Again, at the climax of the play, Scribe makes use, once more, and most effectively, of the same device. "Maurice," released from prison through the generous intervention of "Adrienne"—who has raised on her jewels the amount of his debt—and believing the treacherous "Princesse de Bouillon" to be his benefactress, comes to her house, to thank her. There he meets "Adrienne," who has been invited, that same evening, to recite before a large company. The moment comes; and the actress, furious at the attentions paid by "Maurice" to "Mme. de Bouillon," revenges herself upon her supposed rival by reciting at her the well-known lines of "Phèdre" to "Oenone":[1]

[1] "Phèdre," Act III, Sne 3.

ADRIENNE (*récitant avec une agitation et une fièvre toujours croissante, les yeux fixés sur la princesse, qui se penche plusieurs fois sur l'épaule de Maurice et lui parle bas avec affection*).

"Juste ciel . . . qu'ai je fait aujourd'hui ?
Mon époux va paraître, et son fils avec lui !
Je verrai le témoin de ma flamme adultère
Observant de quel front j'ose aborder son père.
Le cœur gros de soupirs qu'il n'a point écoutés
(*regardant Maurice*).
L'œil humide de pleurs par l'ingrat rebutés,
Pense-tu que, sensible à l'honneur de Thésée,
Il lui cache l'ardeur dont je suis embrasée ?
Laissera-t-il trahir et son père et son roi ?
Pourra-t-il contenir l'horreur qu'il a pour moi ?
Il se tairait en vain ! je sais mes perfidies,
Oenone ! . . . et ne suis point de ces femmes hardies,
(*hors d'elle meme et s'avancant vers la Princesse*)
Qui goutant dans le crime une honteuse paix,
Ont su se faire un front qui ne rougit jamais ! "
(*Elle continue à s'avancer vers la Princesse, qu'elle désigne du doigt . . . pendant que les dames et seigneurs se lèvent comme effrayés de cette scène*).[1]

Now this provides a scene strong both in situation and expression; but, though Oxenford has done his best, this version of the closing outburst:

For I am one of those who cannot feign;
Not one of those who, sinning, shows no trace,
Blest with the gift of an unblushing face,

will not bear comparison with the directness, power, and passion of

Oenone . . . et ne suis point de ces femmes hardies,
Qui, goutant dans le crime une honteuse paix,
Ont su se faire un front qui ne rougit jamais.

[1] Oxenford's version of the passage is as follows:

Oh, fatal is the deed which I have done,
I must behold my husband with his son;
The youth aware of my unholy fire,
Will watch the face with which I meet his sire,
Knowing my heart swells with unheeded sighs,
Unheeded tears still glisten in these eyes.
Will he, indifferent to his father's name,
Conceal that love which is my crime, my shame ?
Conceal the horror which he feels for me—
Betray his king ? No, no—it cannot be.
Nay ! if he tried to shield me—'twould be vain,
For I am one of those that cannot feign,
Not one of those who, sinning, shows no trace,
Blest with the gift of an unblushing face !

Upon "ne rougit jamais," a tragédienne trained in declamation can pour out all her strength; and in France she could do it with correspondingly heightened effect, upon a stage rival, and upon an audience who, we may suppose, had heard her deliver that identical passage in the rôle of "Phèdre."

Against all such disadvantages, and many others, the English exponent of "Adrienne" had to contend, with the counterpoise only in her favour—that her style, graceful, natural, subtle, and very Latin in its limpid lucidity, was essentially of the French school.[1] Granted this, the part remains a very difficult one. Strong passion has to be displayed in many scenes; but in none, save the last, is it allowed full expression.[2] Its intensity, therefore, must be indicated and suggested, rather than fully revealed. Only in the death scene, when "Adrienne" has breathed the slow and subtle poison placed by her rival within her lover's bouquet, can her agony of soul find vent.

These difficulties Rachel's English follower triumphantly overcame, as one may read in the press comments of the morrow. That of *The Times* is as follows:

> Probably Mrs. Stirling never acted so finely as in the character of "Adrienne." . . . The intelligence with which she seized upon points not of themselves salient, and the great though quiet force with which she gave them, was admirable. There was a whole history of internal emotion, without anything like violent ebullition. In the cited speeches she had to deliver . . . she laboured under a difficulty which did not exist on the Parisian stage. To the French public these speeches are all familiar, but to the English they were only rendered significant by Mrs. Stirling's excellent delivery. The part of "Michonnet," a strange mixture of comicality and pathos, was beautifully acted by Mr. Farren. The success of the drama was unequivocal, and the principal actors and the author were loudly called.

This verdict the *Examiner* endorsed.

> Mrs. Stirling is so very admirable in it that the drama may be looked upon as an important epoch in her dramatic career. She

[1] I incline to think that Mrs. Stirling had some French blood in her: Miss Baylis believes that she was Irish-Celt on one side of her family.

[2] In the French version "Adrienne" also recites passages from Corneille's "Psyche."

really sustained it, lifting it up, when it flagged towards the beginning; and, when the introductory part was over, giving full force to the great recitation scene.

Here we may anticipate a little, by adding that Rachel herself played the part for the first time in England, at St. James's Theatre, on July 8, 1850, with extraordinary success, "the curtain descending upon the concluding tableau amid the audible sighs and sobs of the audience."[1]

The event, indeed, created something of a sensation in theatrical London; but the management of the little Strand, nothing daunted, promptly challenged comparison, by reviving the English version. One evening a slim young woman was observed to be sitting in the stalls, and frequently applauding Mrs. Stirling. It was Mdlle. Rachel herself. What her detailed impressions of the performance were, it would be interesting to know. That the two renderings differed greatly, and that there was no imitation, and that in intensity the English woman did not approach the French tragédienne, we may be absolutely sure. Some of the critics, therefore, took occasion to admonish severely the Strand management, for thus daring to rush in.

Mrs. Stirling is unquestionably an accomplished and versatile actress, and has no superior on the English stage in many parts in which she has achieved deserved popularity: she cannot, however, increase her reputation by competing with the greatest of living artistes in this part. Had we seen only Mrs. Stirling's "Adrienne Lecouvreur" we should have pronounced it an excellent performance, exhibiting great variety of style, and powerful development of passion: but, having witnessed Rachel in the part, we must, despite our nationality, confess that there is only one actress in the world who can really play it.[2]

This is honest and fair, and probably expresses the opinion of nine-tenths of those who saw both performances; yet I cannot help thinking it possible that, in the lighter touches of the part—I mean especially in tenderness and pathos—Mrs. Stirling was at least Rachel's equal, if not her superior, even though the French actress eclipsed her in vehemence and in passion. Those latter qualities in

[1] *Sunday Times*, July 14, 1850. [2] *Ibid*, July 6, 1851.

Rachel, it is interesting to note, did not wholly please all English critics. Macready, in his diary, July 9, 1847, had written:

> Went to see Rachel in "Phèdre." It was a very striking performance, all intensity; all in a spirit of vehemence and fury, that made me feel a want of keeping. I could have fancied a more self-contained performance, more passionate fondness, not fury, in her love, and more pathos. I could imagine a performance exciting more pity for the character than she inspired, and equal effect in the scenes of rage and despair.

Théophile Gautier, moreover, had written: "Rachel fut froide comme l'antiquité." These comments are somewhat paradoxical; yet one wonders whether Rachel did not, on occasion, tear her passion to tatters, and lose in tenderness what she gained in intensity? But we may not push too far a comparison between actresses whom we have not seen.

Having here touched tragedy, and gained a popular success in a serious play, it might have been supposed that Mrs. Stirling, henceforth, would be seen more often in dramas that would draw upon, and so develop, her tragic power, This was so; but only to a limited extent, because the Farrens always relied principally upon lighter work for their financial success, and also for the reason that we lacked, and were to continue to lack, playwrights and plays capable of providing the necessary medium. Mrs. Stirling's versatility, moreover, was, in this respect, a handicap to her. The actress who can "do anything," is naturally given everything to do; and the lady herself had no particular desire to specialize. All was fish that came to her net.

With the close of the year she was given two parts that pleased her: "Miss Hardcastle," in "She Stoops to Conquer," December 1, 1849, followed, on the 11th, by one of the most delicately fragrant little productions of the century, a versified translation, by Sir Theodore Martin, of a play from the Danish of Henrik Hertz, entitled "King René's Daughter." [1] The monarch in question being "Good

[1] Revived a few years ago at the Old Vic, with Miss Sybil Thorndyke as "Iolanthe."

King René," the æsthetic and dilettante prince, whose portrait is still to be seen carved upon the cathedral doors of Aix, and whose memories yet linger pleasantly among the sunny vine-lands of Provence. The play, which had proved a triumphant success on the continent, was originally translated for Miss Faucit, and should have been produced in Dublin, for the season of 1848–49: that lady's illness, however, necessitated a postponement, and ultimately, with her permission, it was put on, instead, at the Strand, where Mrs. Stirling replaced Miss Faucit as the blind princess, "Iolanthe."

The success of the venture was as great as could have been expected, seeing that the little idyll is of the lightest texture, almost wholly devoid of dramatic quality, and dependent for success upon its limpid, lyrical beauty, the atmosphere of mediæval romance in which it is conceived, and, of course, upon the ability of the players worthily to interpret the author's poetry. This Mrs. Stirling was able to do, throughout a part which, in its simplicity, innocence, and idealism, was as far removed as any rôle could be from the passionate intensity of "Adrienne." "This pleasing little Danish drama," says the *Examiner*, "has elicited a new phase of Mrs. Stirling's versatility and talent." It is pleasant, moreover, to have to record her appearance, during those barren days of theatrical literature, in a play that possessed some claim to literary feeling and excellence.[1]

The critic of *The Times* best describes this rendering of "Iolanthe."

> Mrs. Stirling is just the actress to seize on a definite idea, and to work it out with thoughtfulness and accuracy. The uncertainty of her movements as the blind girl, the attitudes which were too pleasing to be called awkward, but which yet conveyed the notion of an in-

[1] The play was first translated into English by Jane Francis Chapman in 1845, and first played in these islands on November 28, 1848, at the Theatre Royal, Dublin—a translation by the Hon. Edward Phipps. This was a triumph for the Keans, the comments of the Irish press being among the most laudatory I ever saw. The Irish are wholehearted in blessing, as in cursing. The Keans revived it at the St. James's, April 10, 1850, with Charles Kean as "Count Tristan" and Mrs. C. Kean as "Iolanthe." Sir T. Martin, in his biography of Helen Faucit (Lady Martin), does not mention Mrs. Stirling in connection with "Iolanthe," nor with "Adrienne."

ability in the body to obey the dictates of the mind, were highly truthful, and the air of trusting simplicity with which she replied even to a strange voice, was the more pathetic from the complete absence of exaggeration. The attitude with which, on her restoration to sight, she greeted the sky above her, approached the statuesque, and showed a profound conception of the beauty of the situation.

My mother tells me that she remembers "Iolanthe" as among the most beautiful of her mother's performances.

CHAPTER X

STRAND, OLYMPIC, AND HAYMARKET

1849–51

Mrs. Glover's last appearances—Her "Mrs. Heidelberg" in "The Clandestine Marriage"—Her farewell to the stage—Popularity of the Strand—Mrs. Stirling's "Minerva" in Talfourd's "Diogenes"—As "Constance" in "The Love Chase"—Her "Constance" and Mrs. Nisbett's compared—"Olivia" in "The Vicar of Wakefield"—"Polly Crisp," a popular success—Plays from Germany: "Poor Cousin Walter" and "Power and Principle"—Death of Mrs. Glover—Mrs. Glover's and Mrs. Stirling's renderings of "Mrs. Malaprop" compared—Mrs. Stirling succeeds Mrs. Glover as leading English exponent of old comedy—"The Daughter of the Stars" and "My Wife's Daughter"—Revival of "Speed the Plough"—Uses of crude melodrama—Critical article on Mrs. Stirling in *Tallis's Magazine*—"All is not Gold that Glitters"—Mrs. Stirling as "Martha Gibbs"—Retirement of Macready—"King Charles" and "Sir Roger de Coverley."

DURING this memorable season at the Strand, where Mrs. Stirling's star was in the ascendant, one of her old stage companions in the same company was making her farewell appearances, in plays and parts that had long been associated with her name. We refer, of course, to Mrs. Glover, who, on November 12, 1849, appeared as "Mrs. Heidelberg" in Garrick's and Colman the elder's famous comedy, "The Clandestine Marriage," to the "Lord Ogleby" of William Farren senior, and the "Fanny" of Mrs. Stirling.

The veteran actress had now abandoned new parts; but in old favourites, such as this, she was almost as good as ever, and notably as "Mrs. Heidelberg."

It is in such parts [wrote the critic of the *Sunday Times*][1] that this admirable actress still plays with all the fire and spirit of her youth, and we perceive the vast distance that lies between her and the cleverest of her modern successors.[2]

[1] November 18, 1849.

[2] "The Clandestine Marriage" was one of the best comedies of its

This, be it observed, with "the cleverest of her modern successors" in the same cast!

This "little nutshell of a theatre," called the Strand, though, of course, limited in its holding and financial capacities, was then very popular and prosperous, as might be expected, in view of the company's strength, and the variety of dramatic fare supplied. Among the attractions at the close of the year was a clever burlesque by Sergeant Talfourd,[1] entitled "Diogenes," in which Mrs. Stirling played "Minerva," followed, on January 21, 1850, by that really excellent and representative farce of Sheridan Knowles, "The Love Chase," with Mrs. Glover in her old part of "Widow Green," and W. Farren senior, for the first time, as "Sir William Fondlove," played at the original production by Strickland.

Mrs. Stirling took Mrs. Nisbett's rôle of "Neighbour Constance," in which she had already appeared with Macready at the Haymarket, in 1840. "Constance" was a character that suited her well, and she made quite a hit in it, the manner in which she rallied "Neighbour Wildrake," and her forced gaiety, when she fancies that he is about to marry elsewhere, being, it seems, most naturally and effectively done. Comparing her acting in "The Love Chase" with that of Mrs. Nisbett, contemporary critics opined that, while the latter was more excellent in the expression of irresistible mirth—a faculty in which she appears to have had never an equal upon the legitimate stage, excepting only Mrs. Jordan—Mrs. Stirling put more light and shade into the picture. Touches of natural tenderness, visible through the assumed indifference of the wayward girl, gave an inexpressible charm to the interpretation.

century. Coleman, in his *Charles Reade* makes the latter say, concerning the *spoken word* in this play, "No private reader could ever *see* these words as Glover used to *fire* them in 'The Clandestine Marriage.' . . . 'Will Sir John take Fanny without a fortune? No! After you have settled the largest part of your property on your youngest daughter, can there be an equal portion left to the elder? No! Doesn't this overturn the whole system of the family? Yes!'"

[1] Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd (1795–1854) had become known to the theatrical world by the production of his tragedy, "Ion," at Covent Garden, in 1836. None of his other writings for the stage met with great success.

"The Love Chase" was followed by Tom Taylor's version of the "Vicar of Wakefield," in which Mrs. Stirling played "Olivia," [1] a performance still remembered with pleasure by living persons, including Sir Squire Bancroft, who has told the writer how much he enjoyed it, boy though he was at the time. Later on Mrs. Stirling made "Olivia" one of her most popular parts, after "Peg Woffington," though her performance was never technically equal to that of Mrs. Glover as "Mrs. Primrose." There followed an opportunity to burlesque Mrs. Glover herself, in a farce specially written for Mrs. Stirling, by Stirling Coyne, entitled "A New and Peculiar Scene in the Life of an Unprotected Female." This unprotected female, "Polly Crisp," had the play all to herself, and, with the aid of a little ventriloquism, could have done it alone. "Polly," in doubt concerning her future way of life, decides upon the stage, and proceeds accordingly to prepare herself. Mrs. Stirling, always ready for some fun, entered thoroughly into the spirit of the thing. As "Mrs. Heidelberg," "Juliet," and other well-known characters, she gave the audience extremely clever imitations of Mrs. Glover and Mrs. Kean, with a clothes-horse for balcony, and, for "Romeo," a stick robed in a barrister's gown, and wigged. It all sounds very undignified to modern ears, but was typical of the time.

One critic's appreciation moved him twice to latinity.

> As to the performance of Mrs. Stirling (*omnes junctæ in una*) 'twas inimitable. The unflagging energy and the *vivida vis animi* which she threw into the part were truly astonishing; and just as "Diogenes," in the after piece, seeks with his lantern for an honest man, we shall only say, were Mr. Coyne to search the metropolis for a "Polly Crisp," he could find but one, and that one decidedly Mrs. Stirling.[2]

The part was one of her popular triumphs.

April brought "Poor Cousin Walter," in which Mrs. Stirling, Cooke, W. Farren junior, and Leigh Murray took part, in costumes of 1660. The story was quite im-

[1] Recently revived, in Wills's version, by Miss Viola Tree, at the Aldwych, with Miss Gladys Cooper as "Olivia." The most fascinating of all the "Olivia's," no doubt, was Miss Ellen Terry, who, with (Sir) John Hare, was the first to play it in Wills's version.

[2] *Sunday Times*, February 10, 1850.

probable, not to say impossible, yet there was a certain elegance and neatness about Palgrave Simpson's work, that —as in the case of "Time Tries All"—eked out by good acting, saved the play, and effectually concealed its German origin; for the author acknowledged indebtedness to "Der Landwizth," "The Farmer," by Princess Amelia of Saxony.

The management of the New Strand produced, in June 1850, without much success, another work of Teutonic origin, "Power and Principle," from Schiller's early play, "Kabale und Liebe," of his "storm and pressure period," [1] adapted by Morris Barnett.

Mrs. Glover, meanwhile, had retired from the stage. On June 8 she gave her last performance at the Strand, as "Mrs. Malaprop," and on July 12 she chose the same part for her farewell performance at Drury Lane. Ill and almost voiceless, the veteran actress came through the evening as best she might, and was seen no more upon the boards. Within a few weeks she had passed from the world-stage also, dying on July 16, 1850, amid the general regrets of all who knew her, whether only as a great actress, or also as a good woman. Having already referred more than once to this great descendant of Betterton, we need not here reiterate; but, since Mrs. Stirling was to be her legitimate successor in high comedy generally, and in old English comedy in particular, it may be interesting to compare the methods of the two actresses in the rôle of "Mrs. Malaprop," the last that Mrs. Glover played, and one in which neither she nor Mrs. Stirling, in their respective manners, have ever been equalled. The following study is by Westland Marston, one of the most penetrating, and also among the sanest, of nineteenth-century dramatic critics: [2]

Those who having seen Mrs. Glover in "Mrs. Malaprop," have also seen Mrs. Stirling's admirably telling delineation, full of intrigue, life, and movement, of the same part, have had an opportunity of seeing the utmost that two differing methods can produce, and of comparing their effects. In the hands of each, the general outlines

[1] Sturm und Drangperiode.
[2] *Our Recent Actors*, 1888, i. 262.

of a character so broadly defined as "Mrs. Malaprop," were, of course, identical. The difference—and it was considerable—lay in shades of expression. In uttering the grandiloquent phraseology of the part, Mrs. Glover's self-satisfaction was more restrained, but not less profound, than Mrs. Stirling's. The former seemed to hug the secret of her superiority, the latter to revel in its presumed effect upon her listeners. The compliments of "Captain Absolute" were received by Mrs. Glover with evident pleasure, indeed, but with a consciousness that they were absolutely her due; by Mrs. Stirling with a flutter of delighted vanity. In hearing herself described as an old weather-beaten she-dragon resentment predominates with Mrs. Stirling, whilst with Mrs. Glover an appealing astonishment against the profanity of the impeachment was the leading sentiment. There are now few who have had a chance of contrasting the claims of these two admirable actresses in the part in question; but even those who have the liveliest recollection of Mrs. Glover will recognize in Mrs. Stirling's "Mrs. Malaprop" the finest example of old comedy acting left to the contemporary stage.

This sagacious analysis was written a quarter of a century or so later than 1850, the year we are now considering. Mrs. Stirling had not then played "Mrs. Malaprop," nor—had she done so—could she have matched the technical acquirements of the more mature actress. The passing of Mrs. Glover was to bring her larger opportunities in old English comedy, and, with opportunity, experience that had not hitherto come her way.

Heavy, indeed, was the work imposed upon Farren's leading lady at this time. On August 5 she played "Miriam," "The Daughter of the Stars," a strong acting part, in the character of an impertinent yet withal virtuous, philosophical, poetical, and epigrammatic gipsy. Shirley Brooks, the author, here curiously dodging dramatic convention, by denying to "Miriam," at last, the man of her love, and so bringing down upon the head of an innocent victim all the misery entailed by the sins of others.

During the same month, W. Farren, the lessee of the Strand, took the Olympic, and on September 2 transferred thither his whole company, with "The Daughter of the Stars." "Miriam," however, broke down on September 4, and "Secret Service" was substituted, until the 12th, when Farren put on "Giralada, or the Invisible Husband," a somewhat colourless, and rather

MRS. STIRLING, ABOUT 1850.

To face p. 120.

suggestive, piece, adapted by Welstead from Scribe, who, though too fond of trafficking in morbid sensibilities —as in "Adrienne Lecouvreur"—was the ablest and most prolific dramatist of his day, highly skilled in constructing a plot of intrigue, and in weaving a complex story, without too much entangling his threads. Another version of the same play, by Ben Webster, was done at the Haymarket at the same time.

October brought "My Wife's Daughter," cleverly adapted from "La Femme de Quarante Ans," by Stirling Coyne, who, in this piece, slight as it was, touched a level rather higher than any reached in his earlier work, which had consisted mainly of broad farce. The play, though no wiser than many of its kind, was, as the French title suggests, deftly contrived to provide a competent actress with a carefully developed character-sketch of a married lady of forty—a woman of warm affections and of fine sensibility, yet so acutely alive to the difference of years between herself and her husband, that "un ombre, un souffle, un rien, tout lui donnait la fièvre."

The *Sunday Times*[1] was appreciative.

> Mrs. Stirling's impersonation of the loving and sensitive wife is one of the most highly finished and perfectly artistic delineations of character that we have ever seen. Mr. Compton, too, has struck out for himself a new and distinct line of comic assumption in the dignified "Gillyflower," the gentleman's gentleman—a vulgar arrogance and imperturbable carelessness admirably sustained.

This run of success was bringing the Olympic, as it had previously brought the Strand, prominently into public notice; and the house, despite its inferior situation, was not only fully, but also fashionably attended. The Farrens took the opportunity to engage Miss Helen Faucit, who, after an absence of three years, reappeared upon the stage, in a tragedy by Westland Marston, "Philip of France[2] and Marie de Meraine," with Gustavus Brooke as the King. Later Miss Faucit played "Pauline" in "The Lady of Lyons," and appeared also in "The Hunchback," leaving, just before Christmas, for a provincial tour.

[1] October 17, 1830.

[2] Philippe Auguste.

Mrs. Stirling, meanwhile, was appearing in a number of revivals of her old parts, including "Laura" in "Time Tries All," and "Portia" to G. W. Brooke's "Shylock"; but the strain of incessant and arduous work was beginning already to make itself so felt that, for a time, she was seriously indisposed. Billed for "Gwynneth Vaughan," her breakdown compelled the Farrens to substitute that once popular old melodrama, "Speed the Plough," by Thomas Morton the elder, the heroine of which, "Susan Ashfield," she had played in the old days.[1] In "Mrs. Grundy," Mrs. Ashfield's mythical friend, we have, I suppose, the original of the social critic, whose name—except among students of the stage—has outlived her creator; for this must have been one of the last revivals of a class of work that—as Downton says of his spendthrift son, in another famous play of bygone days, "The Road to Ruin"—is just "a jumble of fatuity."

"Speed the Plough" teems with stage devices dear to the melodramatist. There are blood-stains, an old portrait, a long-lost brother, a castle in flames, unexpected reappearances, clasped hands, and wedding bells, set in a dialogue of which two samples will give a sufficient idea:

SIR PHILIP. Have you removed every dreadful vestige from the fatal chamber? O! speak!

And this:

HENRY. The opiate that brings me sleep will be the recollection of the day passed in innocence!
SIR PHILIP. Noble boy!

Such gems of dramatic conversation either recall Sir Peter's phrase concerning sentiments, or raise a laugh, according to one's humour; yet, while we smile at them, it is well to remember that such plays as "Speed the Plough," despite their pompous verbosity, staginess, crude characterization, and utter remoteness from real life, did, nevertheless, by their inherent dramatic qualities, help to imbue Mrs. Stirling, and other players of her day, with a bigness and breadth of style essential to complete tech-

[1] I cannot trace the date.

nical equipment. Many modern actors and actresses fail in almost all but drawing-room drama, for want of those very qualities. of broad technique, that stage methods and plays of seventy years ago demanded, and consequently supplied.

During this year, 1850, when her daughter Fanny is eight years old, and domestic pleasures and duties are beginning already to conflict with stage ambitions, there appeared in *Tallis's Magazine* a critical article that well describes, though in somewhat too Victorian language, Mrs. Stirling's development and achievement up to this time. The writer evidently knew the many difficulties and dangers that had beset the actress from the outset of her career, and appreciated sympathetically the courage and perseverance with which they had been met.

The course of theatrical experience to which Mrs. Stirling has been destined, operating upon a flexible and plastic capacity, has given her a versatility of talent which makes her equally ready in all classes of the drama. From the domestic to the heroic, from the comic to the tragic, from farce to the classical drama, Mrs. Stirling is found in every grade of character an efficient representative. To the highest poetry she is now capable of giving appropriate expression. The sweet versification of "King René's Daughter" "fell mended from her tongue."[1] Her elocution, though in tragedy somewhat wanting in variety, is always accurate. Her cadences are exceedingly musical, the tones of her voice remarkably pathetic, and her gestures intensely expressive. She has a countenance capable of displaying remarkable emotion, and also of relapsing into placidity and cheerfulness. Her art is peculiar and individual, unlike that of any other actress. It combines simplicity with art, and not seldom conceals the latter by the prudent interposition of the former.

In this narrative we have traced the course of a well-educated lady, who by the accidental practice of an art, has at length ascertained its principles and their useful application; not the favoured pupil of a school, who by early and timely discipline has been taught the rules and enabled to foresee every step of her progress. All that Mrs. Stirling has attained she has conquered by the labour of a long professional life. Not the slightest toil has been spared her; not the slightest favour been enjoyed. Unassisted, unguided, without patronage or direction, the solitary woman has been deserted, to do battle with the trials, temptations, perils, and difficulties of her position, by means of her native energies, and according to their uninstructed capacity of development. Nature was trusted to do all for her—not fortune. Her bark has been left to the mercy of the

winds and the waves; but the novice at the helm, by simply doing her best, has, after many delays and disappointments, nevertheless succeeded in bringing it into port.

All this implies a heroism of character, perhaps little suspected, but undoubtedly possessed. Mrs. Stirling is one who has suffered much, who has had to endure both wrong and sorrow, whose path has been beset with seductions and dangers; one who has been compelled to submit and patiently to wait; one who has been enabled by Providence to persevere, to find work and to do it; and finally, through good and ill report, to achieve a triumphal issue. Could she have started in life with her present experience in it, she would probably have conducted it after a different model, if indeed it can be said to have a model at all. From the necessity of circumstance, on the contrary, it was from the beginning without plan; instinct throughout, it may be, has substituted reason. But "in that," as the poetic essayist on man has opined, it is "God directs"; in this, "'tis man." "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow"; and the destitute girl, seeking to remedy the evils of her social position simply by her disposition to work, has, with whatever pain and toil, found at length a partial recompense in the public acknowledgment of her merit as an artist; not holding the first place, only because fortune has not been so favourable to her as to others.

"Speed the Plough" was not the only once famous but now extinct melodrama that Farren put on during this season at the Olympic. There followed, on January 13, 1851, another that had a great vogue in its day—"All is not Gold that Glitters," by Thomas Morton the younger, and J. M. Morton, who—need it be said—were adapting from a French original—"Le Journal d'une Fille," or something of the kind. The play throughout is typical of its species, telling a story as artificial as it is improbable. The nature to which it should hold up the mirror—to a superficial glance, at any rate—is not the human nature about us. High-born lady, employer, factory girl, are not of the metal that rings true to ordinary life. And yet one can hardly quarrel with the critic of the *Leader* [1] when he tells us that the play is "a piece very near being charming." Indeed, one might go a step farther and say that it is quite charming, upon this one condition—that the spectator, consciously or unconsciously, accept without

[1] January 18, 1851.

reservation the luminous though profound metaphysical truth, that human creatures are sound at heart, that the love of man for woman is powerful, to the overcoming of obstacles, and that a sense of humour, and a deed of kindness, will shine always, as good deeds in a naughty world. Humanity is the elemental strength of melodrama. "Il connait donc son monde, ce bon Morton"—well enough, at least, to serve a melodramatic purpose.

Mrs. Stirling, no doubt, enjoyed playing the part, though she must have smiled at the *naïveté* of such lines as this, concerning her aristocratic benefactress:

> She stands upon the brink of ruin! Shall I not snatch her from destruction? Yes, yes! I will save her, whose mother preserved mine! (Looks at Sir A.—the villain—and drops her bouquet—the sign.)

Mrs. Stirling could play an intrigue with anybody, but she was always ready, also, for an open-hearted piece of acting; and there was much of the open-hearted in "Martha." That cast at the Olympic, with the Farrens and Leigh Murray also there, must have well satisfied authors and public. *The Times* of January 15 commented:

> The factory girl, "Martha Gibbs," is chiefly marked by her quiet unobtrusiveness, for even her great sacrifices are made without ostentation, and it is just this quiet unobtrusiveness that is admirably assumed by Mrs. Stirling.

Occasionally, however, she seems to have allowed reminiscences of "Adrienne" and "Mrs. Bracegirdle" to intrude themselves; for the *Leader*, while appreciating the charmingly natural touches thrown into the part, asserts that the actress once or twice forgot herself, and mounted the stilts of the tragedy queen. Here was manifest again the old tendency to over-act, due to a too intense desire to please.

"All that Glitters" was followed, at the Olympic, by a light comedy from the pen of Palgrave Simpson, "That Odious Captain Cutter," which I should have passed over, had not the author done what dramatists are not always ready to do—namely, make admission of how much a

play may owe to the manner of its interpretation, and to the indispensable filling up, that a novelist may do for himself, but a playwright must leave to the player. Time after time, during these years, did Mrs. Stirling and her companions save their authors; yet how many returned to give thanks? Simpson did so, at the close of the printed version of his work.

> To Mrs. Stirling and Mr. Leigh Murray the author takes this occasion of offering his grateful acknowledgements of that display of talent, which so very mainly contributed to the success of this little comedy. To both the highest praise is due; for the exquisite grace, finesse, and the true comedy tone with which they so ably filled up the sketches of the characters they represented.

This beginning of 1851 was a time of considerable theatrical prosperity in London. The Princess's, Adelphi, Lyceum, and Olympic were all doing well, and the Queen had been commanding Shakespeare at Windsor Castle. Macready, at the Haymarket, was giving his final performances before taking a last farewell of the London stage, on February 26, amid a scene of enthusiasm almost without parallel in the history of the stage. Too seldom do actors or actresses consent, as Macready and the Bancrofts did, to retire while yet at the height of their powers; still more seldom do they so withdraw, as Macready did, without one pang of regret for the beautiful art they are abandoning. Failure to respect his art was a part of his life's tragedy.

At the Olympic, however, the performances during the spring and summer were not of exceptional interest. March brought "King Charles," a comediatta, in which Mrs. Stirling played "Mimi," a French girl.

> If King Charles to Charles King will grant a long day
> Charles King for King Charles for ever will pray;
> If King Charles to Charles King will grant liberty's light,
> Then Charles King for King Charles for ever will fight.

This was followed by "Sir Roger de Coverley,"[1] adapted from Addison by Tom Taylor, who, while

[1] April 21, 1851.

keeping as close as he might to Addisonian speech, had largely to rely upon his own ingenuity for giving the thing a dramatic bent.

Farren, as "Sir Roger" [said the *Sunday Times*] [1] seemed to have stepped out of one of the family pictures; and Mrs. Stirling, in whose hands every character she assumes acquires importance, portrayed with charming grace and vivacity the coquettish "Lady Bellairs."

[1] April 27, 1851.

CHAPTER XI

CHARLES READE AND "THE LADIES' BATTLE"

1851

Enter Charles Reade—Introduced by Rogers, he reads "Christie Johnstone" to Mrs. Stirling—The beginning of a friendship—"La Bataille des Dames"—A dinner party at the "Star and Garter"—Reade adapts "The Ladies' Battle"—Mrs. Stirling as the "Comtesse d'Autreval"—Reade as rehearser and critic—French and English renderings of the "Countess"—Comparisons with Rachel—Letter of "Aristarchus" to Mrs. Stirling—Reade's letter concerning it—Revivals at the Haymarket—"The Man of Law"—Filching from the French—Scandals due to absence of International dramatic copyright—Years of transition.

Our story, hitherto, has brought us into contact with very few individuals who were known personally to any of our contemporaries; but now, as we pass into the second half of the nineteenth century, we are to meet people well remembered by many still living; and this book, though not primarily concerned with the private life of its subject, will lift, here and there, a corner of the veil, and become momentarily, upon occasion, a biography as well as a record.

The very next production at the Olympic, in fact, is to bring vividly into the picture the strange personality of a certain impressionable, eccentric, impetuous, and imaginative young genius, Charles Reade by name. Graphically has he recounted,[1] through the medium of his friend, the late actor John Coleman, the events that led up to, and the results that grew from, his first meetings with Mrs. Stirling.

Charles Reade—then, in 1850, a young man of thirty-six years,[2] smitten, almost from boyhood, with a love of the stage, that was to develop into a passion—numbered

[1] *Charles Reade*, by John Coleman, p. 81 *et seq.*
[2] Born June 8, 1814.

already among his friends certain actors, with one of whom, Jimmy Rogers,[1] otherwise "Melancholy James"—melancholy off the stage, though humorous upon it, after the manner of his kind—he was upon terms of close intimacy.

Now Reade, having written a play, "Christie Johnstone," that he was anxious to see produced, had asked "Melancholy James" for assistance in the matter. In the month of November 1850 [2] the latter had written to Reade, to the effect that the "gorgious Stirling" had consented to hear "Christie" read by its author. Reade at once left Oxford, with the manuscript in his pocket, came to London, and from a seat in Rogers' box, at the Olympic, saw Mrs. Stirling play "Laura Leeson" in "Time Tries All," Courtnay's little comedy, of which we have already written.[3]

When the play was over, "Melancholy James" took his companion across the stage—a first experience that made his heart glow—and introduced him to Mrs. Stirling, in her dressing-room. Let him describe her as she then was.[4]

> You who have only seen Fanny Stirling in her declining years can form no idea of what she was like when she first dawned on me in the full rich glow of ripe womanhood. Above the middle height, an abundance of brown waving hair, a somewhat pronounced nose, sparkling eyes, luscious rosy lips, a bewitching smile, and a mouthful of teeth like a young horse. . . .
>
> "Well, Jimmy," said she, beaming, "so this is your young friend from Oxford?"
>
> "M'yas, queen of my soul, the very identical flute," responded James. "This blessed play of his is O.K. and has a rippin' part for you. He's come all the way to town to read it to you. When is it to be?"
>
> "To-morrow at eleven—second floor—27 Arundel Street. Excuse me. Glad to form your acquaintance, sir. Emily, the door."
>
> Then she bowed us out, like an empress; and it had all been done without my getting a word in edgeways.

[1] "There was a complete unconsciousness of his own power to make one laugh, which was more droll than I can describe. It was irresistible: a sad face with a curious under-current of humour—an odd quiet look of surprise when an audience roared at him; the more sadly surprised he appeared, the more they laughed." *The Bancrofts*, p. 37.

[2] Almost certainly November 13 or 16, 1850. The play was frequently put on for a few nights.

[3] See *ante*, p. 100.

[4] Coleman's *Reade*, pp. 81 *et seq.* Her beauty was evidently vital and temperamental, rather than regular or classic.

Next morning the lady gave him a very cordial welcome at Arundel Street. He read his play, of which, to his intense disappointment, she did not approve. Personally, however, he made an impression, received an invitation to stay to lunch—a good lunch. He accepted it, and so began a friendship that was to have consequences, as is not unusual when a beautiful and brilliant actress, and a clever impressionable artist of the pen, are brought by destiny together.

Some six months later, Charles Reade—recently installed Vice-Chancellor of Magdalen, Oxford, for 1851—finding himself at Paris, on private business, attended—March 17—the première of a new comedy, by Scribe and Legouvé, entitled "La Bataille des Dames." Pleased with the play, and perceiving, in the "Comtesse d'Autreval," a fine part for Mrs. Stirling, he obtained a copy of Scribe's work, and without so much as a "By-your-leave!" proceeded, after the piratical fashion of the day, to translate and adapt it for the London stage. On his return to town he read "The Ladies' Battle" to Mrs. Stirling, who this time was duly impressed. The two put their heads together; a dinner party was arranged, at the "Star and Garter," Richmond, to which were invited Tom Taylor, the Farrens, Leigh Murray, and others, who were all to be of the cast; and ultimately, on May 7, "The Ladies' Battle" was produced at the Olympic, this being, according to Reade, the first occasion—and I suppose the last—upon which any Vice-Chancellor of a University College had accomplished such a feat during his year of office.

The play was only moderately successful, despite excellent acting, in which Leigh Murray, though too robust and manly, distinguished himself highly as "de Crignon." As for Mrs. Stirling, "she," says Reade, "was head and shoulders above everybody." This may well have been the case, though, for reasons that will be more apparent before long, it is necessary already to discount somewhat his enthusiasm for his new friend. Intensely susceptible to woman's beauty, and extraordinarily impulsive by nature, his heart sometimes overruled his head, and he was eager at this time to lavish upon Mrs. Stirling praises that he

never again bestowed upon any actress, excepting perhaps only one—Kate Terry.

Concerning Mrs. Stirling's performance in "The Ladies' Battle," Reade, nevertheless, was able to give sound reasons for the faith that was in him. Immature though it might be, his faculty of analysing an actor's performance was already strongly developed; while his vivid and intensely dramatic imagination, and his intuitive sympathy with the art of the stage, rendered him already a competent, though difficult and precocious, stage-manager. That he was fully aware of his abilities in this respect, the following extract shows:

> A play of mine loses so enormously when not rehearsed by me, that I fear I shall always torment them for the sake of my own credit. What a difference there was in "The Ladies' Battle" brought out at a second-rate theatre under my rehearsal, and at a first-rate theatre under Leigh Murray's. . . . He (the author) cannot speak beautifully, as actors ought, but he can give the exact point of every sentence in his work, and the acting business is to tune these words, and point, and tone, and dilate, and beautify them. This is done by Mrs. Stirling in the long soliloquy in "The Ladies' Battle," and was done all through the play.

Very interesting, too, is his comparison between Mrs. Stirling's methods in the part and those adopted by French actresses.

> The "Countess" is so much better acted than on the French stage that it merits a particular notice.
>
> The French artists who have attempted this character have gone through it with elegance and weakness; of the latter the text is innocent. Mrs. Stirling is the first who has rendered Scribe and Legouvé in full. These gentlemen meant the "Countess" to be seriously affected by her feelings and her passion. People with brains, who love, are apt to be.
>
> The soliloquy in Act I is one of the longest that, in a Comedy, has been risked in a Female Comedian's hands (in England) for some years. It is, however, perfectly safe with this lady. Each change of passion in it is marked by her with truth and vigour. The irresolute inspection of the mirror, the ejaculation, and still more the look that precedes it, are fine strokes of art. It is more than a change of expression; a new face radiant with beauty and hope, glides into the place of one clouded with misgivings. These things escape a vulgar audience, and vulgar critics, for an obvious reason: they are

great feats of acting; but the fact is, the world would have to be ransacked to find another artist who should render this beauty altogether as well as it is done in little Wych Street.

This point was taken in Paris, as far as the voice, which is nearly half the business; but at the French theatre in London it is entirely missed. . . . Mrs. Stirling gives the part the reality that belongs to it, and *acts* it with equal power and grace, instead of walking, gliding, or dancing through it.—C. R.

Following upon "The Ladies' Battle" came a comparative failure, made memorable principally by another of Reade's intrusions.

The success of "Adrienne Lecouvreur," very naturally had tempted Farren to experiment again with a French tragedy, that Mdlle. Rachel and her company had been performing recently at St. James's Theatre. This was Victor Hugo's "Angelo," a heavy, lurid, melodramatic, and unpleasant, though strong, play of Italian life in Padua during the turbulent sixteenth century. Mrs. Stirling was entrusted with another of those stormy actress parts, "La Tisbe," in which she could portray all those conflicting passions, of love, jealousy, hatred, cunning, duplicity, heroism, and self-sacrifice, with a fidelity and power that no other English actress of her day could match, and that Rachel only could surpass.

Again the press teemed with comparisons, of which we will print one here.

Mrs. Stirling's was a highly finished delineation of the fascinating comédienne, who, despite the errors that her position has drawn her into . . . is so brilliant, so ardent, so noble, and so unselfish in her love, that we are constrained to admire her and sympathize with her. The love that can forgo its own gratification to promote the happiness of the beloved object was pourtrayed with extraordinary intensity by Mrs. Stirling. We think we have witnessed few personations upon the stage in which the lights and shadows of the character were more carefully preserved than in this. Mdlle. Rachel electrified us by some of the great points, in some of her scenes, especially that in which "Tisbe" draws a contrast between the open immorality of the comédienne, and the secret sinning of the reputedly modest lady of the "Podesta"; nothing could equal the withering effect of the French artist's eloquence in this powerful invective, but if Mrs. Stirling could not compete with Rachel in this scene, she left an impression that, as a whole, the character was more completely filled

up. In the lighter scenes, at the commencement of the play, Mrs. Stirling had decidedly the advantage of the French artiste; her acting in the scene when she obtains the master-key from the "Podesta," by pretending that she loved him, was marked by the most delicate finesse and charming spirit of coquetry imaginable.[1]

About the same time, in mid-August 1851, Mrs. Stirling received a criticism that probably interested her much more. It took the form of an anonymous letter, and was as follows:

In May last, Madam, Fate conducted me to the pit of the Olympic Theatre.

I saw you play in Genteel Comedy.[2]

You played with an ease and brilliance rarely combined in these days.

I was surprised. I knew you to have talent, grace, glee, and a pathos peculiar to yourself—but I did not know you were the first genteel Comedian in England. Seeing you announced in Tragedy, I returned to Wych Street Monday last;[3] shall I own, with some misgivings. Madam, I am an Old Critic, who criticized Actors in days when Criticism implied some sensibility, some judgment, quick senses, and a dash of Integrity. Of late I have not written, but I have talked; and you teach me I have talked too fast.

I have not canted nor descended to wholesale abuse, which is always dishonest; I have admitted that we have actresses who rant with more delicacy, and recite with a better fervour than their predecessors of the same calibre.

But I have complained of the want of that real force of Impersonation which makes the Actor, male or female.

I have been looking to the Future for this: you seem to tell me it has been all these years under my Nose, and I without the wit to discern it.

Is it really so? are you not like Goldsmith "a flower that bloomed late," or has the jealousy of Theatrical management kept you from your place at the highest pinnacle of your Art? I cannot understand it—let us confine ourselves to the Facts as they are.

Had I seen you fifteen years ago play the Countess Something[4] and "La Tisbe," I should have told you what I tell you now—that you are perhaps the first Impersonator of great and contrary characters in Europe; and this is a long way on the road to being the first Actress.

[1] *Sunday Times*, August 17, 1851.

[2] "The Widow" in "Sir Roger de Coverley."

[3] Either the first night, Monday, August 11, or Monday, August 18. The play was withdrawn Sat. August 24. It was an adaptation of Victor Hugo's "Angelo."

[4] "Comtesse d'Autreval" in "The Ladies' Battle."

In England there is no actress at present who could play either the Tragic or the Comic part so well as you do both. Such, Madam, is your Merit.

Heaven knows what is your position: let it not affect your Estimate of yourself too much: there were not half a dozen people in my early day who could judge Acting, and I am sure that there are not half that now; but go on as you are going, and what I tell you now all the world will tell you by and by.

Will you now let an old fellow go through the part of "Tisbe" with you. It is a fine performance, full of faults, as all human performances are, but full of beauties, which they generally are not.

1. You enter speaking. Spirited and judicious![1] It shows sense and self-denial to enter as a character, not Mrs. So-and-So. Impersonation and Illusion cannot begin too soon.

2. Your narrative is skilfully told and varied, and the way you indicate a Mind going back, along with the tale, to early scenes and sentiments, shows Mind in your conception.[2]

3. Two little speeches to the "Podesta" "Why don't you die?" and "Would you like 'yes' better?" are spoken by you a shade too roughly.

4. The scene with "Rodolfo"[3] is beyond praise, almost as far as it is beyond Mademoiselle Rachel. I mention her because she is your predecessor, and eclipses you in several scenes of this play that you do in common.

In this scene you rise from impersonation to personification; you are the Goddess of Love en "Tisbe." This is the poetry of acting.

5. "Angelo" and "Tisbe": I cannot judge you here; you follow Rachel; and I must say it is six for one and half a dozen for the other. The way in which both ladies say "I love you,"[4] in the chain business, is not to be surpassed by a third—since you separate often and with the best effect from your predecessor, we are the more indebted to you that you can imitate her where so much is to be gained by it.

Act 2. You have not the lightning declamation of Rachel. What you want is a little more indignation, a little less spite, and greater

[1] A good entrance was one of Mrs. Stirling's characteristics.

[2] The "Podesta," in love with "Tisbe," has seen her talking with another man, and is jealous, and curious. "Tisbe" reveals something of her past, and how she is looking for a young woman, who, years before, had saved her ("Tisbe's") mother's life. The mother had given that woman a crucifix, telling her to keep it, as it would bring her happiness. By means of that crucifix "Tisbe" hopes to, and does, identify her benefactress, who turns out to be the "Podesta's" wife.

[3] She is in love with "Rodolfo," but does not yet know that he is not in love with her.

[4] "Tisbe" pretends to be in love with "Angelo" in order to coax from him his chain, on which is the master key to his private apartments. A spy has promised her sight of her lover if she can first get the key.

rapidity. Act it a little more, and quicker, and let the points take care of themselves—you are nearly right, but not quite, a trifle will do it. Your position, however, on the stage as you hurl back the three invectives of your preceding speech is finely imagined for the rhetorical purpose, and gives you one effect she missed.[1]

Your dumb play with the crucifix is also superior; Rachel does not so visibly soften. The authors, French and English, are in your debt here, for you take better care of their plot at a critical juncture than they have taken themselves.

Your play of feature and manner, whilst making up your story and answering the "Podesta's" questions, is admirable; your competitor's is good, but not quite so good. Her self-possession comes too soon for the suspense of the audience, she inclines to put them at their ease, you to keep them on tenter-hooks.[2] I think you are right. I will trouble you with a few more remarks to-morrow, meantime may Heaven give you Health, Spirits, Perseverance. I suppose you must be forty,[3] but to me you come as a young Actress just entering upon a bright and high career. May I be so fortunate as to encourage you a little. I know how much artists prize and need encouragement, and therefore snatch a moment for you from my musty duties.

Were I to sign my Name, I might seem to wish to court your attention, and to turn out an old fool. So adieu, and whenever you play a new part, remember that there will be a surly old dog in the pit who will snarl if he sees you disposed to retrograde—and this old dog you may call

ARISTARCHUS.

The "surly old dog" might call and sign himself "Aristarchus," or by any other name he pleased, but it did not need a woman of Mrs. Stirling's penetration to identify him, at once, as Charles Reade. Apart from other evidences, the eccentricity of the conceit, the cocksureness of the style, at once revealed the author, who was compelled to own up. Years later he wrote to his friend, Mrs. Baylis, this letter recalling and explaining the incident:

[1] "Tisbe," now the "Podesta," "Angelo's" mistress, has obtained entry by means of the key into the chamber of the "Podesta's" wife, "Catarina," which "Rodolfo," who loves and is loved by "Catarina"—and whom "Tisbe" also loves, though in vain—has just quitted. There is a violent scene between the women. "Tisbe" is already calling "Angelo," when "Catarina," expecting instant death, rushes to pray before the crucifix. "Tisbe" then recognizes the crucifix of which she is in quest. Henceforth she is "Catarina's" friend, and for her makes the great sacrifice.

[2] The "Podesta" has entered, and "Tisbe," to save her new friend, invents a story that, by deceiving, pacifies him.

[3] Mrs. Stirling was in her thirty-ninth year.

Charles Reade to Mrs. Baylis.

MAGDALEN COLLEGE, OXFORD,
(no date).

DEAR MRS. BAYLIS,

Rummaging among my papers I have found this which I send you because I think you will like me none the less for having written it—it was an anonymous letter to Mrs. Stirling—this is the copy in my own handwriting. I had observed that she valued praise from strangers more than from me—and I was going to write her a series of anonymous letters to cheer her in her profession.

I was fool enough to think I could disguise myself—need I add that her keen eye penetrated the very first attempt and nipped my anonymous flower at the root. However, it may amuse you, and I make you a present of it. Say! did I not love this woman? I am quite contented, dear Mrs. Baylis, and hope to be an artist of the pen before I die

Yours sincerely,
READE.

In "The Cloister and the Hearth" that aspiration was completely realized.

Upon the failure of the Hugo drama, "Hearts are Trumps" and "All that Glitters" were revived for a time, until, in October, Mrs. Stirling left the Olympic, after a stay of rather more than one year, during which she had greatly increased her professional reputation. During the autumn she negotiated with the management of the Adelphi, while touring for a few weeks in the North of England and Scotland. Her Adelphi plan, however, did not mature, and she was engaged, instead, by Ben Webster at the Haymarket, opening on Monday, November 17, in a revival of "The Ladies' Battle."

Its successor, "The Man of Law," produced on December 9, was, alas! equally French, having been adapted for the Parisian stage by the actor, Regnier, from a novel written by George Sand's friend, the Academician, Jules Sandeau, from whom she had taken her nom-de-plume. Very successful at Paris, under the title "Mdlle. de la Seiglière," it had been brought across the Channel by Ben Webster, after one of his many foraging expeditions to the French capital, in search of dramatic stuff for the Adelphi or the Haymarket.

Writers for the stage were then internationally unprotected, and managers exploited them without scruple. It was a lamentable state of affairs. Ever since the success of "Don César de Bazan," in 1844, English authors had been filching, right and left, from the French dramatists. With equal audacity, and want of consideration, the Americans were pirating English plays—when there were any to pirate—as Charles Reade, and others, were soon, to their great chagrin, to discover. The press of the time was despondent concerning the stage in general. It bewailed sorrowfully the lack of original pieces, and the utter dearth of fresh stage talent—especially of the more robust sort—as players of the old school died out. Where, they sighed, shall we find another Mrs. Glover? where a Macready, a James Wallack, a Liston, an Elliston, or a Mathews? Fears were voiced that the ever increasing facilities of access from town to town, and the exodus of the stars to the provinces, at large salaries, would utterly do away with provincial theatres, as schools of art, in which young players, under experienced managers, could learn thoroughly their work, without being driven to confront a London audience before years of study had equipped them for the ordeal.

Such were the forebodings of the critics during this opening decade of the second half of the century: and there was much to colour their arguments. They could not be expected to see clearly, as we can to-day, that these years of apparent decadence were also days of healthy transition from the old order to the new; for on the first night of that revival of "Hearts are Trumps" at the Olympic, August 25, 1851, was produced Robertson's first important play, "A Night's Adventure"—and Robertson, with the Bancrofts, may be looked upon as a welcome herald of the modern drama.

Mrs. Stirling, meanwhile, was appearing, with Leigh Murray, Howe, Lambert, and Miss A. Vining, in "The Man of Law," a post-revolution play, in which, as so often before, the leading lady must needs exert all her wiles and powers of fascination, against a doughty opponent. She succeeded once more, maintaining fully her reputation as the first actress on the stage, in characters requiring a

polished style, good breeding, and the art of elaborating effectively, and without apparent effort, the minutest traits of a dramatic portrait. Ben Webster, too, as the lawyer, subtle, prolific of stratagems, adept at intrigue, smooth and insinuating of address, gave an unusually excellent study.

One of the last things produced before the Haymarket closed temporarily, on July 21, was "The Spitalfields Weaver," in which a then promising amateur, J. S. Toole, made his first professional appearance.

CHAPTER XII

"PEG WOFFINGTON"

1852–53

A holiday in Devon—Return to London—Reade conceives the idea of Mrs. Stirling as "Peg Woffington"—Collaboration with Taylor—Disagreements and discords—Rehabilitation of the actor a subject then in vogue at Paris—Authors' respective shares in "Masks and Faces"—Criticisms of the play—Of Mrs. Stirling as "Peg"—A triumphant first night—Knight's comparison between Mrs. Stirling and Mrs. Bancroft as "Peg"—Miss Thorndyke as "Peg" at the Old Vic.—Webster as "Triplet"—Phillips's portrait of Mrs. Stirling as "Peg"—Provincial engagements—Mrs. Stirling unhappy despite her successes—Pathetic letter to Mrs. Baylis—The causes—Edinburgh and Newcastle—Critique in the *Newcastle Journal*—A "state of irritation"—Glover, Mrs. Stirling, and Charles Reade—Dangers and difficulties.

This book bearing the title that it does, I do not propose greatly to concern myself, or the reader, with the private life, or the private friendships, of Mrs. Stirling; nor, indeed, had I the inclination, do I possess the knowledge necessary to make the picture complete. An occasional momentary lifting of the curtain, however, by throwing light upon my grandmother's character as a woman, and upon the often difficult circumstances in which her stage-work was done, must certainly conduce towards a more complete, and therefore juster, estimate of her rank as an artist; and, at the same time, by humanizing the story, will afford some relief from a too monotonous recital of dramatic events.

As will have been gathered from a single sentence of Charles Reade's letter to Mrs. Baylis, quoted in the last chapter, the friendship that had been established over the manuscript of "Christie Johnstone" between the young dramatist and the admired actress, was fast developing, particularly on the part of the man, whom we may suppose planning in his fertile brain many schemes for her advance-

ment, and concocting the plot of more than one play about the personality of his adored Mrs. Stirling.

That lady, while her friend's dreams are maturing, is still working hard at the Haymarket, without accomplishing anything that was to add materially to her reputation. Her principal parts, from January to June 1852, were "Lady Gay" in "London Assurance"; "Fanny Morrison" in Mark Lemon's "Mind Your Own Business"; the lead in Buckstone's play "Married Life," at his own benefit performance; and the rôle of "Mrs. Moore" in "A Novel Expedient."

By the middle of July she has thrown up work for a time, and is making holiday, with her daughter Fanny, in a farmhouse, at Uphill, Devon, whence, on the morning of her thirty-ninth birthday, she writes to Mrs. Baylis[1] a very characteristic letter:

Thursday Morning,
My birthday,
July 29, 1852.

My Dear Little Woman,

Here we are in a great dairy farm swimming in milk, cream, curds, whey, cheeses, Fan[2] running wild with cows, fat pigs, fowls, and curly-headed children—such bread—such eggs—such butter as you have no idea of! You don't know what bread means! I am turning into a complete animal!—have not opened a book since I've been here. I do nothing but listen to the "sad sea wave"—sit a top of a hill! and drink in the fresh air—eat, drink, bathe, and sleep—and with all that the day is gone before I feel that I am up! You cannot tell how I wish you were here! We are at "Uphill"—the name will tell you that it rises from the sea—great green lanes—and a little church atop of a hill that breaks your back to climb up to it! Everything smelling of buttercups, daisies, fruit, flowers, cows and birds—all the doors open—everybody making butter, cheese, and truck—everybody speaks to everybody as they pass! I've tried so to get you a loaf, but they only bake on Mondays, and 'tis too stale, but here is a wee bit of butter just for you to taste, and two eggs Fan has just carried in from under the poor hen.

You shall hear from me by post, for Mrs. Gregory goes to London with this, and now I am all alone with Fan, and shall have time to read and write. If you can spare time for a word to tell me of your

[1] Grandmother of Miss Lilian Baylis, the present Manager of the Old Vic.

[2] Fanny Stirling, the writer's mother, then in her eleventh year.

movements, and will leave it at Piccadilly for me, Mrs. Gregory[1] comes back here on Sunday, and will bring it. God bless you till then.

At what date exactly the actress returned to London, I do not know; but suppose it to have been during the autumn of the same year.

When telling, in the last chapter, the origin of "The Ladies' Battle," I mentioned that Charles Reade, at Mrs. Stirling's suggestion, had included Tom Taylor among the guests invited to a Sunday dinner party at the Star and Garter Hotel, at Richmond. The two young dramatists took to one another—for a time—and Taylor subsequently visited Reade at Oxford, where the latter first broached to him a subject that "had been seething in his mind from the first moment that he met Mrs. Stirling—'Peg Woffington' as the heroine of a play." Peg's facial acquaintance, by the way, he had already made, through the medium of the portrait by Hogarth, in the Garrick Club.

Taylor approved the idea; collaboration was decided upon, and—Reade having already written a scene or two—they played battledore and shuttlecock with the manuscript for some considerable time, without getting "a bit forarder." Hoping thereby to make better progress, Reade went to stay with Taylor, at Chiswick, and while his host was absent at office, during the day, wrote scene after scene, that Taylor—by far the more experienced dramatist of the two—invariably cut out at night.

Both men were irritable and pugnacious, and were soon at loggerheads. In fact, they could agree upon very little concerning the play, except that Mrs. Stirling was to be its heroine, a request to which she had consented, subject to certain alterations being made in the manuscript—"this would not do, and that would not do," when the play was read and discussed at Mrs. Baylis's house. When the authors ultimately agreed to differ, she sided, more or less, with Taylor, as did also Ben Webster, who had accepted the play from Taylor, for the Haymarket.

[1] This lady I presume to be the first wife of Mr. C. H. Gregory, afterwards Sir Charles Hutton Gregory, the well-known civil engineer, whom Mrs. Stirling married in 1894.

Reade, in a huff, went off to his home at Ipsden, and thence to a hydro at Malvern, whence he returned, to find the comedy—willy-nilly—on the eve of production, at last. What sort of a fabrication was it, that, after many months of wrangling between two choleric authors, had come to the test of public opinion ?

The subject—rehabilitation of an actress's character—was rather in vogue across the Channel at that time, and Tom Taylor and Reade decided that England should follow suit. They produced, accordingly, their version, for the glorification of our national actress, Peg Woffington. Concerning their respective shares in the comedy, there has been much debate, but the truth is now clear. The main idea was Reade's ; so were most of the characters and incidents. The whole of the garret scene was his also ; but the construction and detail of the play were mainly Taylor's, he being by far the more experienced man, in technical matters. Taylor's summing-up was thus : "He (Reade) put them (the scenes) together higgeldy-piggledy. They stood on their heads, and I put them on their heels."

Knowing the story of its growth, one is not surprised to observe that "Masks and Faces," from the constructional point of view, is poor. Situations and characters are of the stock variety, nor is even the most telling incident new—the face in the picture having been seen already, in Bernard's "Mummy"; and a face through a curtain in Victor Hugo's "Notre Dame." The weakest point of all, however, is the plot, which is of the very thinnest texture, being very little more than a series of pictures cleverly combined. "Masks and Faces," nevertheless, as the critic of the *Leader* [1] pointed out,

> has the elements of eternal success—character and emotion. . . . Laughter and tears of sympathy alternate through the varying scene ; bright, ingenious dialogue, playing like lambent flame, stimulates the intellect ; and homely pathos, homely mirth, kind hearts and loving voices gently touch the various chords of emotion.

I should not have ventured to describe the comedy quite so lyrically, nor so exuberantly ; but that is how "Masks

[1] November 27, 1852. G. H. Lewes was the writer.

and Faces," at its first production, struck one of the most intelligent critics of his century. He continues:

Mrs. Stirling has not, for a long while, had a part which shows her off to such advantage, and she evidently resolved not to let a bit of it slip through her fingers. She was gay, natural, touching, loving throughout, and made one perfectly understand Ernest Vane's infatuation, though not his subsequent desertion of her for his wife.

Other journals were equally emphatic.

Stepping gracefully from seriousness to gaiety, and equally natural in both, Mrs. Stirling is completely in her element as "Peg Woffington," and has all the benefit of a contrast in the girlish, effusive manner which is very prettily assumed by Miss Rose Bennett in the character of "Mrs. Vane." [1]

The *Daily News* [2] shrewdly pointed out, as a defect of the play, that while the idealized Mrs. Woffington was just such a character as Kitty Clive was in real life, the "Kitty Clive" of "Masks and Faces" has a part that is insignificant and untrue. The actor, Quin, of Bath fame, moreover, was less of a bounder than Tom Taylor would have him to be. Nevertheless, whatever the comedy's defects, Webster—who played "Triplet"—Mrs. Stirling, and her companions touched all hearts. And upon the stage—with the vast majority of the paying public—hearts are always trumps.

The first night was a memorable one for all concerned.

Webster was a bit loose in the text (he always is); then that infernal "Zummersetshire" dialect was against him, but he *can* act; and as for La Stirling, she carried everything before her like wildfire; and the curtain fell upon a scene of unbounded enthusiasm.

I forgot all about the alterations and the rows, and ramped round in a transport of delight, embraced my faithless "Peggy" in the sight of all Israel, hugged Taylor and Webster, and then, for the first time in my life, was called for; and Taylor led me before the curtain, and the house rose at us, and I cried for joy.[3]

Of Mrs. Stirling's performance many play-goers, then

[1] *The Times*, November 22, 1852. [2] November 22, 1852.
[3] Coleman's *Reade*, p. 94.

young, retained for years a delightful impression. A critic of 1869 writes:

In "Peg Woffington" all her talents shine forth with peculiar lustre; in fact, we may judge of them from that impersonation alone. Peg Woffington was not only a great actress, but a woman of wonderful natural powers, cramped and perverted by the imperfection of her early training. She was perpetually yearning for that which the accidents of her birth and position denied her. These conflicting passions are fully shown in Mrs. Stirling's impersonation, which will be always remembered among playgoers as one of the finest efforts of the modern stage.

In the *Daily Graphic* of January 1, 1896, we get another pleasant memory of "Peg":

Mrs. Stirling was at that time, even, disposed to be artificial and mannered. This tendency, in this character, she held completely in restraint, and the scenes in the garret of "Triplet" were among the most bewitching in comedy. The appearance of the face peeping through the hole in the picture, and maintaining a mock gravity in the presence of the absurd censure of the critics, is one of the things that the recollection is delighted to retain.

Joseph Knight has left us[1] an interesting comparison between Mrs. Stirling's methods and those of Mrs. Bancroft, who later succeeded her in the part:[2]

Mrs. Bancroft has never failed to cast new light upon a character in which she appeared. Her "Peg Woffington" differs from that of Mrs. Stirling in more than one important respect. With Mrs. Stirling the triumph of goodness which raised the actress to the capacity for complete self-abnegation, seemed due to a rich and ripe nature, and to an overflow of animal spirits. With the latter exponent it springs from a succession of impulses. To accomplish the sacrifice cost more in the later interpretation than in the earlier. Something in the bright being Mrs. Stirling presented seemed antagonistic to sorrow. With Mrs. Bancroft impulses, bad and good, followed each other in wave-like succession. . . .

Speaking of a more recent revival—at the Old Vic when that accomplished actress, Miss Sybil Thorndyke, played "Peg"—Mr. Newton Baylis recently expressed to

[1] *Theatrical Notes*, 1893, p. 74.

[2] Lady Bancroft's rendering was deliberate. She "could see but one way out of the difficulty, to treat the part in a distinctly new way." *The Bancrofts*, p. 173.

MRS. STIRLING AS "PEG WOFFINGTON," AND BEN WEBSTER AS "TRIPLET," IN "MASKS AND FACES."

To face p. 141.

the writer his recollection of the wonderful fascination of the original "Peg," in the part, and with what extraordinary vivacity she always threw herself into the jig, in the garret scene. With recollections of the original in his mind, Mr. Baylis ventured to offer Miss Thorndyke some hints concerning the dancing of that jig, with the result that it was encored every night, when he would jokingly remind the latest "Peg": "That was my encore, you know, not yours!" Mr. Ben Greet tells me that he looks upon "Peg Woffington" as a test part for a comedy actress. And he should know; for he has played "Triplet" about one thousand times, to about a dozen "Pegs," of whom Miss Thorndyke was the latest and best; though none of them came up to the original.

Concerning the success of Webster's "Triplet," in the original production, Westland Marston has written thus: [1]

> The study of "Triplet" in the actor's hands might be taken as a type of the penurious author of the time. The distraction amid the sordid cares of life; the nervous impatience, soon atoned for by contrition; the moods of gloomy reverie, at times half pierced by the hope of a nature originally sanguine, but which time and suffering had tamed and daunted; the desperation with which, when unable to please himself with "Peg's" likeness, he plunged his knife through the canvas, together with an artlessness of look and voice which spoke an unworldly mind—all these degrees of the better mental worker were so truly indicated, that a glance, a change of tone, however delicate, a stoop, a step backward or forward, or a fluttering movement of the hand, were more significant even than the excellent dialogue in which he took part. And withal this "Triplet" was a gentleman; no poverty of garb or surroundings could hide that; while the perfect unconsciousness with which this inner refinement showed itself, was a touch of art so true and unpretending that it was seen only in its effects.

Of Mrs. Stirling's personal appearance at this period of her life—she was in her fortieth year when "Masks and Faces" was first produced—and of the type of face that, for night after night, gazed through the hole in the hacked picture, Charles Reade has already given the reader a vivid idea.[2] There is also the portrait of her as "Peg Woffington," painted by Henry Wyndham Phillips,[3] that hangs in the

[1] *Our Recent Actors*, i. 246. [2] See *ante*, p. 129. [3] Opposite p. 146.

Garrick Club; and a replica of it—or vice versa—in the Shakespeare Memorial Gallery, at Stratford-on-Avon. The picture is that of a very pretty woman, delicately graceful, with a rather long, oval face, large expressive eyes, arched eyebrows, a straight nose, a daintily curved mouth and chin, and a demure, almost wistful expression, that, one easily supposes, may, upon slight provocation, become merry or even roguish. The costume is charming—a scarlet dress, cut low, and edged with white; a broad-brimmed hat to match, and a lace cap beneath—in the fashion of the time—tied under the chin with a broad white knot. The lady wears a blue-grey cloak, against a dark background.

The original portrait of Mrs. Stirling [according to the Catalogue of the Garrick Club [1]] was painted for the late Mr. Tom Taylor, and was ultimately in Mrs. Stirling's possession.[2] The sittings were given after performances, late at night, in Mr. Phillips's studio. The style and treatment are in part borrowed from an old miniature. The picture used during representation at the Haymarket Theatre was also a sketch by the (same) artist, with a practical cut for the insertion of the face.

Regarded as a revelation of character, this portrait seems to me to differ from and to be inferior to those painted later, in this—that Phillips has not conveyed so much as a hint of the rich, ripe, mellow humour and joy of life, in which the part abounds, and which was generally characteristic of the actress—that humour so plainly visible in the other portrait of her at the Garrick,[3] and in photographs taken round about the period of her "Nurse" at the Lyceum. I cannot easily escape the conclusion that the painter—in an attempt to make the face conventionally pretty—has refined and idealized his subject out of all true resemblance. Mrs. Stirling was a beautiful woman—one who knew her well described her to me as "the loveliest creature he ever saw"—but that beauty was not of a classic order, as Charles Reade's description proves. The charm of the face depended less upon regularity of form and feature, than upon expression, intelligence, and animation.

[1] No. 96.

[2] Who bequeathed it—or a replica of it—to Lady Bancroft. *Bancroft Memoirs*, p. 173.

[3] Opposite p. 180.

MRS. STIRLING AS "PEG WOFFINGTON."

From the Painting by H. WYNDHAM PHILLIPS, in the Garrick Club.

Reproduced by courtesy of the Committee of the Garrick Club.

To face p. 146.

Mrs. Stirling, of course, in common with other leading players of her day, frequently, and profitably, filled in the weeks between her London engagements, by touring the provinces.[1] I have not thought it worth while to dig out, from the provincial press, all the details, nor even all the dates of these tours. It will be remembered, however, that the whole period, from the close of her engagement at the Pavilion Theatre, in October 1832, to her appearance at the Adelphi, London, in January 1836, was spent in the provinces. From that time onward she toured occasionally, especially during the fifties and early sixties, when her established position assured her the reception, and salary, of a star.[2]

In October 1851, for example, she was engaged for a week, at the Amphitheatre, Liverpool, in "The Reigning Favourite" ("Adrienne Lecouvreur"), "The Factory Girl" ("All is not Gold that Glitters"), and "King René's Daughter," concerning which last the correspondent of the *Era* wrote: "We find it a task of some difficulty to decide whether she or Miss Helen Faucit play it the best." As for "All that Glitters," the request, "Take a card," became a catch-word wherever the melodrama was put on.

March 1853 brought her to the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, where she played for a week in "Time Tries All" and "Masks and Faces," which latter had already superseded "The Reigning Favourite," as the most popular play in her repertoire. The success of the performance, as a whole, does not appear to have been so complete as in England, for, with the possible exception of Gourlay, who played "Triplet," the rest of the company were unprepared and imperfect; and the critic of the *Scotsman*, in the "gude" Scottish fashion of his time, commented adversely upon the moral tone of the comedy. Everywhere, however, the leading lady herself conquered all hearts, and won, not infrequently, a reception that can only be described as triumphant.

Here then some readers, unmindful of what has gone before, may well be imagining the actress—famous, fêted,

[1] She received about this time a liberal offer from America, but declined it. So far as I know, she never played further afield than Scotland.

[2] Her provincial salary sometimes reached £100 a week.

and rich—as among the happiest and most enviable of mortals. Not so smoothly, alas! run the invisible undercurrents of our lives. Mrs. Stirling, far from being happy, was now at war with herself, as witness the following letter to Mrs. Baylis, written from Edinburgh at about this period of her life:[1]

55, Prince's Street, Edinburgh,
Monday Night.
(Probably March 21, 1853.)

My Dear Mrs. Baylis,

I was glad to find a line from you with my letters to-day. My time is so filled up, or I could be very wretched at being away from home.

I have made a grand success, you must know! I cannot spare the newspapers for you, but I will keep you a copy of them all, for extracts are being printed for Glascow (*sic*), where I play next Monday, and as there are no trains out of this *Holy drunken place on Sundays*, why I can't go to Glascow until Monday morning, as I play here Saturday night—so any letters posted after Friday night's post must be directed to me at the Prince's Theatre Royal, Glascow. The people here are warm and kind beyond anything, and they are talking already about my going back. I am writing for an extension to Webster, and if I get it, most probably should return here after Glasgow, then go to Newcastle, but all that is in the clouds at present, and yet with all success and kindness and so on, I am longing to get back home. Oh! if mine was a real happy home, what a home-bird I should be! My little Fan goes to Malvern to-morrow. I hope she will get there safely.

You must not miss me yet, dear little woman, though I feel myself as though I had been away an age, and can hardly believe that I have only played four nights of my engagement.

My dear little friend, I feel that I am hardly the right sort of companion for you in your unhappiness—you ought to be with those who could not make it a subject of conversation, or if they did should be better able to advise you than I. Pity is not good for you, be sure—be certain that unhappiness is doled out to us all pretty evenly; the happiest person one could find would tell us there was *something* wanting, depend on it.

If your poor sister herself is well and safe, I think the poor child not living a happiness, tho' I'm quite aware I should be looked upon as a wretch for saying so—one trouble and responsibility (and perhaps unhappiness in the end) the less for her.

Yes! The gude folk here in this land o' cakes do like me and are civil, and I feel how hard-hearted and ungrateful I am in not

[1] I cannot exactly determine the date. Certainly it is between 1852 and 1854, probably during spring of 1853.

loving them in return. The penalty one pays in heaping all one's love on any one particular being is a kind of hardening of the heart to all others' amiabilities and kindness. We lose much comfort through this, I am convinced, and so my theory is proved, that all is ironed out pretty smoothly by Dame Fate or whoever it is does these things. I only know that with kindness, success, money, a dear child such as there are but few—I am not happy! and I know, at the same time, 'tis because I am not good!

Those pathetic closing lines shed a revealing light upon Mrs. Stirling's state of mind during this period of her life, and afford a typical example of the ceaseless mental warfare that is waged between the artist and the mother, in many women's hearts. I have not the slightest doubt—this letter and others that will follow make it too evident—that, for all her stage triumphs, my grandmother was in secret conflict with her profession, and was longing, with all the intensity of her nature, for a complete domestic happiness, that was to be denied her utterly until perhaps the last year or so of her long life. Upon one particular being she had set all her affection, and that being was not a man; it was her daughter, Fanny, from whom, nevertheless, circumstance, and the coming years, were, at last, completely to alienate her.

Yet the round of work must be accomplished, and the unclouded face conceal the aching heart. From Edinburgh the actress went to the Theatre Royal in Dunlop Street, Glasgow, where she played "Peg," for a week, to the "Triplet" of Glover,[1] the manager, who became, it seems —or would have become—one of her closest friends. Her success here was complete. The *Glasgow Herald* records "bumper houses," "deafening acclamation," and "delighted audiences." At her benefit, on April 14, she played in "The Ladies' Battle" and "Masks and Faces"; then went off to Newcastle—her first appearance in that town—where, in addition to "Peg," she played "Adrienne," and "Julia Amor" in "Love and Charity."[2]

Concerning her art the critic of the *Newcastle Journal*[3] wrote an appreciation that is perhaps worth preserving,

[1] Glover had taken over the theatre in the autumn of 1852.
[2] April 11–23, 1853. [3] April 16, 1853.

though I do not agree with the "reflecting critic's" definition of art set forth in the first paragraph:

As Mrs. Stirling is no ordinary actor, it may not be amiss to notice the kind of art a Newcastle audience has made acquaintance with in the person of the artist. All reflecting critics are agreed that "art is a true but brilliant copy of nature," and there is the key to Mrs. Stirling. Such as retain a lingering faith in the existence of such things in art as a stage walk, or a stage voice, or stage gestures, will be staggered at first, and ultimately converted by the simplicity and truth of Mrs. Stirling, who is simple and true, because she is as profound in art, as those who are not simple and true are shallow. In common with Mdlle. Rachel, this artist has discovered that deep passion can only be represented by an apparent attempt to repress and force it in, never by that obvious attempt to force it out that we call *rant*, and therefore, like Rachel, and unlike all other tragedians, *she never rants under any circumstances whatever*; but yet she holds the audience with iron power in moments of passion. The best evidence of her truth is, that *the audience reflect back the exact image of her emotion.* When she personifies sorrow, they do not exhibit applause, which represents admiration, but tears, which prove sympathy. When she impersonates gaiety, the heart really warms and exults under her sunny smile, and the rich music of her laugh and voice. But perhaps her greatest trait is her power of genuine personation. Few actors possess this; still fewer actresses. If the general run even of admired performances are looked into, it will be found that the actor has, as far as he is concerned, varied himself but little. The writers, in giving one man different words, sentiments, and actions have made nearly all the difference that ever shows itself. Miss H. Faucit's, Miss Glyn's, Mr. Brooke's performances, have, spite of their rhetorical beauties, this considerable flaw. For this is not the Histrionic Art, as distinguished from all branches of the Rhetorical Art; it is not the full measure of art as practised by Garrick, Oldfield, and Woffington, by Rachel and Bouffe in France, and in a smaller walk by Wigan and Webster, and in a wide range by Mrs. Stirling. This lady is the artist of the day who has, partly from nature and immense study, the rare power of dropping Mrs. Stirling in her dressing-room, and coming on the stage a Frenchwoman, an Englishwoman, a countess, a charity girl, a peasant, an actress, a virgin, a matron, a prude, a coquette, etc., etc., with face, mien, voice, manner, gesture, all exactly fitting the part of the hour, and not its predecessor or successor. And this is the great art of acting, as distinguished from the great art of speaking, which is rare, though not so rare as the other. Our readers will, we think, understand at once what we are endeavouring to point out, when they see the Proteus-like powers of Mrs. Stirling exhibit themselves in one or two characters of an opposite description. Mrs. Stirling plays tragedy, comedy, and farce; and while she is upon the stage, it is impossible to say which she does best, but if we look

at the number and character of her pieces, it will be evident that she has a predilection, however well concealed; and this predilection we pronounce to be in favour of genteel or interesting comedy, or the higher kind of drama. Until lately the novel writers understood the public better than (did) the playwrights, but latterly these have learned to tell novels upon the stage . . . naturally such a story will be at one moment gay, at another sad, for . . . human life is your true *comédie larmoyante*, and lies, together with the truth, between the monotonous groan of tragedy and the monotonous grin of farce. Of this *comédie larmoyante* Mrs. Stirling is the priestess. . . . We hear on all sides that Mrs. Stirling's "Peg Woffington" is the most unrivalled performance seen for many years upon the French or British stage. There are actors who gain the first night all the applause that will ever be due to them. On the contrary, it requires many nights and close attention to appreciate the various and subtle art of so profound an artist as Mrs. Stirling.

In addition to, and partly because of, her other troubles, Mrs. Stirling was beginning already to suffer in health, and for that reason, probably, seems to have rested during the summer of 1853. She accepted, however, an autumn engagement, to appear for six nights, from September 19, at the Theatre Royal, Liverpool, in "Masks and Faces."[1] The critic of the *Liverpool Journal*, whose memories went back to the time of Miss O'Neill, described "Peg Woffington" as the greatest performance he had ever seen, and Mrs. Stirling as the greatest actress of the age.

From the Royal she migrated, with Compton, to the Liverpool Amphitheatre, where she played—in addition to "Masks and Faces"—in "Love and Charity," "My Wife's Daughter," and "She Stoops to Conquer." Dramatically successful, she was still unhappy and restless, if, as I suppose, the following fragment of a letter, written to Mrs. Baylis, may be dated from Liverpool during this engagement:

". . . He sends a boy instantly, who takes me to the first den he can find, and *such* a den! You can fancy nothing like it! So picture me here, wet, cold, wretched, with nothing to do—my books lost—my journey useless, too wet to go out to try and find even a clean den to sit down in, and this prospect all to-morrow—no one to speak to, no nothing! Fancy all this added to the state of irritation I was already in; and, just to crown all, this moment comes from Wigan a letter in answer to one I had sent begging for a week

[1] Compton the comedian was with her, appearing in the after pieces, "Friend Waggles," and "Founded on Fact."

in Edinbro', beginning 17th Oct., and for which Wyndham offers me a clear £100, and I am obliged to refuse it because Wigan will be ready to open on the 7th,[1] and I am in both the opening pieces, he says! Good-bye—write to me here till Friday.

The poor lady's "state of irritation" is easily accounted for by troubles more serious than the discomforts of a provincial tour. Borne hither and thither by her duties, while her heart was with her daughter at home; in failing health, beset, as every attractive actress is, to some extent, by the importunate attentions of men, Mrs. Stirling knew not where to find heart's ease. She was, as we have seen, on terms of friendship with Glover, the manager of the Theatre Royal at Glasgow, friendly also with Charles Reade,[2] who—sanguine, impetuous, and dazzled by her charm and ability—was offering to ally his fortunes with hers, and to help her to raise herself—as he then believed she could, and would—to the very highest pinnacle of professional advancement.

He had written to her, some time previously, a letter to that effect, too intimate and too passionate for quotation. What the tenor of her reply was I do not know, but I suppose it to have been more cold than cordial. There had followed a breach of friendship, and, probably, some sort of reconciliation. The atmosphere, nevertheless, was still electric, as Charles Reade was fully aware, when he wrote to Mrs. Baylis the following letter, probably in the early autumn of 1853:

Charles Reade to Mrs. Baylis.

MAGDALEN COLLEGE, OXFORD.
(No date.)

DEAR MRS. B.,

When a storm is blowing it is well to give all parties notice. That shuffling personage Mr. Glover received from me, whilst I was at Newcastle, a request that he would settle with me, for the first

[1] She began at the Olympic on the 17th, not the 7th, the pieces being "Plot and Passion" and "The Camp at the Olympic."

[2] Miss Ellen Terry's penetrating description of Charles Reade is: "Dear, kind, unjust, generous, cautious, impulsive, passionate, gentle Charles Reade, who combined so many qualities far asunder as the poles. He was placid and turbulent, yet always majestic. He was inexplicable, and entirely lovable—a stupid old dear, and as wise as Solomon. He seemed guileless, and yet had moments of suspicion and craftiness worthy of the wisdom of the serpent."

time in his life—no answer. A month later I proposed to him to pay me a small sum for "Masks and Faces" and "Ladies' Battle" (I asked him some four or five pounds, I think, for the two), and also settle with me for "Gold," which is the subject of a distinct agreement. His Treasurer writes to me, by order no doubt, and tells me he is out—as if a manager was ever out of communication with his theatre and its affairs. On this, after awhile insisting upon an answer—evasion or procrastination having failed, Mr. G. now bids his Treasurer take a very different ground. Mr. Houghton writes to me to say that I had promised Glover my plays gratis during Mrs. Stirling's engagements, and that it was only on this understanding Glover produced them and that but for this he would not have[1] produced them. I answer Glover, I remind him of the simple Truth: viz. that I offered him both plays gratis provided he shared the house with Mrs. Stirling—for this obvious reason—I should have been giving them not to Sam Glover but to Mrs. S.

He declined this proposal in presence of Mrs. S. at Glasgow, and said very justly that the Author's fees were too small an inducement to lead him to share with a star. He therefore forfeited my offer, preferring another advantage to it—he separated entirely his interest from Mrs. Stirling's and of course he shall pay me something for my plays. I have not asked the shabby dog much, and if he won't pay that little, I shall instantly take legal proceedings against him, and as I have told him, if he gives me that trouble I shall take the full benefit of the Act, and sue him for 40s. per representation both of "Masks and Faces" and "Ladies' Battle." Liberality or kindness is wasted upon the blackguards of the stage.

When I brought Mrs. Stirling and this man together I charged him nothing for my trifles; this was perhaps from regard for her, but she benefited nothing by it—it was this man who benefited.

A year later, although Mrs. S. and I were not friends, this beggar still got my work for nothing—because, God knows why, I did not choose—in short, I can't tell why, but this animal was the gainer.

And now all the presents I have made him don't assist me in getting out of him a few pounds for a piece of work that has cost me so much trouble. I asked him nothing for the Benefit Night, because that Night I considered the Theatre Mrs. Stirling's. The other nights he shall pay, by God.

And I will trouble you, if necessary, to communicate to Mrs. S. my feelings on this systematic robbery practised upon the class I represent, and upon myself in particular, and I venture to hope in a clear case like this I shall not have her to fight against as well as Mr. G.

The Newcastle case was different. Davis produced a letter written by Mrs. S.; the sentence he relied on was not so intended by her, but it bore that signification, and I had the pleasure in waiving all

[1] N.B.—A notorious lie.

claim—as an Author—of showing him that it was done out (of) deference to a sentence that had fallen from her pen—but here there is no evasion or reason. It is simply the old story—all the lower orders of intellect, the actors, the fiddlers, the carpenters, the money-takers are to be paid for their feats, but the real man of mind, the creator of that which alone keeps these heroes and heroines from sinking gradually out of all public estimation—is not to be remunerated for his hard toil—*nous verrons.*

These fools run in their groove like moles, till they fancy they are below the notice of the law, and their tricks without remedy in this world. Secure of being damned, they assume too readily that they are not to be kicked.

Now, I have carefully studied the Act for the protection of Literary Property in these Islands, an Act framed against rogues, as appears on the face of it, and I will venture to attack Sam Glover with its penalties, if he does not come to book. Meantime oblige me by informing Mrs. Stirling that *to this Man* henceforth, until further notice, the price of any play of mine is 40s. per representation. He has a similar warning from me until my just claims are satisfied.

Christie Johnstone goes on but slowly. I corrected this day proof sheets up to p. 240.[1] I think there are 100 pages more to come, so I fear it will be no fatter a vol. than *Peg Woff.*

I dare say I shall send Mrs. Stirling a copy—and you must read hers: it will only take you an hour and a half.

It wants juice, to my fancy—is good fruit, perhaps, but not ripened.

My two vols. will be a much heavier blow—at least I think so—but Lord, if you knew the trouble and bother of writing a solid work upon my present plan, i.e. verifying everything I say or describe! To write my two vols. I must read twenty, and hunt up men as well as books.

C. J. concludes with a panegyric on Marriage (as I understand it). I describe it as Moses might the promised land, all the brighter because I have no hope of ever tasting it. God's will be done! My head aches—because I have allowed this lump of dirt, Glover, to put me in a passion; so I must leave off with apologies for an egotistical letter, and am

Yours sincerely,
CHARLES READE.

That Mrs. Stirling had, in part, brought these troubles upon herself is undoubtedly true; yet it is difficult to blame her. Launched from earliest youth, without knowledge or experience, without friends, or wise counsel, or guidance,

[1] *Christie Johnstone* was published in the autumn or early winter of 1853.

into an arduous, seductive, and dangerous profession, with all the added temptations that accompany unusual personal attractions—graces imposed, moreover, upon an impulsive and ardent temperament—who can wonder that she made many and irreparable mistakes? A quarter of a century had already gone towards the perfecting of her dramatic art; a yet longer span of years must be lived, before she could acquire the rudiments of a not less difficult art—practical wisdom in the guidance of her life. No period of her career had brought her greater personal triumphs, as an actress, than had these of the early fifties; nor had any years brought her, at the same time, graver problems, difficulties, and disillusionments.

CHAPTER XIII

WITH ROBSON AT THE OLYMPIC

1853-61

Mrs. Stirling resumes, under Wigan at the Olympic—"Plot and Passion"—Robson's great success—The quality of his acting—"Most singular dramatic genius of the day"—Mrs. Stirling breaks down, and contemplates retirement—Her return to the Olympic—"Lady Teazle"—"Anne Carew" in "A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing"—"Leading Strings," another success—More illness, and provincial tours—"The Red Vial"—Robson's comparative failure—Mrs. Stirling as "Mrs. Bergmann"—The climax of her tragic work—Popularity of Olympic comedies, and high reputation of the company—Mrs. Stirling's versatility—Her melancholy; and verses thereon—First appearances of Miss Fanny Stirling—"The Enchanted Island"—Mother and daughter play together in "A Duke in Difficulties"—Failure of Taylor's comedy—Miss Fanny Stirling leaves the stage—Mrs. Stirling temporarily retires.

Not until October, as we have seen, did London audiences have another opportunity to applaud their favourite, when, on the 17th, she reopened at the Olympic, under Alfred Wigan, who had succeeded Farren in the management. The curtain-raiser was an extravaganza by Planché—"The Camp at the Olympic"—in which Mrs. Stirling played "Comedy, still old fashioned but opposing a flippant grace to the stateliness of Tragedy, in the person of Mrs. Chatterley," a then retired actress, of some repute in her day. This light prelude was a set-off to the once well-known drama, "Plot and Passion," [1] the staple fare of the evening.

To the modern reader it is poor stuff, from the French, as usual, cleverly woven and contrived, as Taylor's work always is, but lacking in charm, for the sufficient reasons that every principal character in it is either a fool, or a knave, or both, and that the element of intrigue is over-

[1] John Lang, who collaborated with Taylor, was leader of the Calcutta Bar.

done. Taylor, with memories of "Adrienne" yet lingering, had intended to give his leading lady a strong part; and, as the impassioned, heart-broken gambler, she threw all her pathos into the rôle of "Marie." But, though she did her utmost—"What a favourite she is!" commented G. H. Lewes—it was not her fault that the feature of the evening was the acting of Robson,[1] in the serious rôle of "Desmarets," underling of Fouché, the famous Minister of Police, of 1810, played by Emery.

Robson had already reached celebrity under W. Farren, Wigan's predecessor at the Olympic, and, in "Plot and Passion," was playing for the first time under Wigan's management. Few critics, at that date, were quite certain whether this actor's true bent was comedy or tragedy; for in his most successful parts—such as "Daddy Hardacre," in an adaptation of Balzac's "Eugénie Grandet"—the tragic and comic elements were so evenly balanced that none knew which predominated, and only the most acute observers could surmise that Robson's peculiar genius was best displayed in transition from one to the other. The farces in which he gained greatest success were those that allowed him to transmute "the tragic passion of terror into its droll equivalent fright,"[2] where all the humour lay in the contrast between the intense seriousness of his emotions, and the ludicrous circumstances that called them forth. Later on, when Mrs. Stirling's pre-eminence at the Olympic was declining, Robson was to be its principal attraction.

Contemporary writers often refer to this extraordinary comedian—"the most singular dramatic genius of the day," as Hollingshead calls him[3]—and the most amazingly clever trimmer between tragedy and farce in all our theatrical annals.[4]

In him the extremes of the sublime and the ridiculous came very near meeting—only that his acting ever kept preponderatingly sub-

[1] His first appearance at the Olympic was in "Salvatore," 1853.
[2] *Saturday Review.* [3] *Memoirs*, i. 127.
[4] My mother's recollection of him is: "Just perfect in burlesque; no one else at all like him." Robson became a close friend of Mrs. Stirling's though he was never a frequent visitor at her house, as, for example, was Leigh Murray.

lime, and that even the loudest burst of laughter that greeted the wonderful little man's comic play and utterances had in them, may be unconscious to actor and audience alike, a subdued undercurrent of sobs and tears.[1]

His coming tragedy thus cast its shadow before. Often nervous, fidgety, and restless upon the stage—and always so off it—this actor, who might have remained long at the head of his profession, became increasingly intemperate, and died in his forty-fourth year, a dipsomaniac.[2]

Of this sad consummation, however, there was no sign when he made what was, I believe, his first appearance with Mrs. Stirling in "Plot and Passion," the after-piece to "The Camp at the Olympic."

Concerning his performance the critic of the *Sunday Times* wrote[3]:

To compare his acting in the character with that of any other actor upon the English stage, would give no idea of his peculiarity; he is an actor *sui generis*, and must be seen to be thoroughly appreciated. His power of facial expression is something marvellous, and the manner in which, by means apparently comic, he produces the most profound tragic passion, is perfectly wonderful. The intensity of his emotion when he declares his love for "Mme. de Fontanges," in the second act, was the *ne plus ultra*—though ludicrous, it was terribly real and effective.[4]

During the early part of 1854, Mrs. Stirling, for reasons of health, was not working at full pressure; and about the middle of May, she broke down and withdrew from the cast. A part of the physical trouble was rheumatism of the eyes, for which she was bled, cupped, and otherwise malpractised upon, after the surgical fashion of that day. She spent a portion of her enforced holiday at Brighton, whence Mrs. Baylis received from her the following letter:

[1] *Toole's Reminiscences*, Hatton, p. 155.
[2] 1864.
[3] October 23, 1853.
[4] Sir Squire Bancroft writes: "I was enthralled by an actor whom I shall never forget—Frederick Robson. I saw him often, and vividly recall his intensity as 'Desmarets' in 'Plot and Passion.' . . . The power of Robson on the stage was contagious like a fever, and, take him all in all, I think he was the most remarkable actor of those days, and perhaps one of the most remarkable of any days." *The Bancrofts*, p. 45.

BRIGHTON, *Wednesday.*

Ah! little woman! little woman! you wouldn't take time by the "fire" lock, and Saturday, I believe, sees me on my road to the great muddle or puddle, or whatever you like to call it, of London, there to try and arrange something for the future—to decide if I act again, and so on.

I am sorry you have not been with us, for we have had lovely weather, and my Fan yesterday had her first plunge this year into the open sea.

I cannot say I find the sight of my eye improved, it looks a little more like the other, and wind and light does not seem to affect it, so after taking the opinion of some good oculist it will soon now be decided whether I am to risk it and act again.

The newspapers put me into such a rage that I really cannot command myself—nothing but horrors and follies and wickednesses—I really believe the best way is never to read one. I shall just get to town too late for all the gaieties and just as the hot weather commences and London is more hateful than ever.

I got a letter the other day commencing: "So 'Clive Newcome'[1] has actually married that pretty simpleton, 'Rosy Mackenzie'—isn't it abominable?" Really, it is very provoking of Thackeray that he will make his heroes and heroines marry the wrong people just as they do in real life.

From this it will be seen that Mrs. Stirling was contemplating retirement from the stage. The doctors, however, must have decided in her favour, for when the Olympic, after closing in August, was reopened on October 9, Emery, Vining, and Mrs. Stirling had all been re-engaged. The leading lady, when the time came, being still too unwell to appear, her parts were taken by Miss Fitzpatrick; and Mrs. Stirling did not return to the stage until the summer of 1855. It is probably to June, of that year, that the next letter belongs.

Saturday.

Only a line, my dear little woman, to tell you I have just signed an engagement, and hope to go to work this day fortnight. It isn't exactly the piece I should have chosen, but 'tis to be hoped something better will come.

Work begins, of course, before the actual night for rehearsals, and study and preparation is *the* work, and that begins literally to-day, for I am going to write my own part out directly. This will knock my trip on the head, but that must come by and by.

[1] *The Newcomes* was published during that year, 1854.

I am sorry to have lost you just now, when you might have helped me with this very part, for I shall have to drag lines, sentences and ideas from all sorts of sources, and put them into this, if I am to do anything with it. This isn't a letter, dear, only a line to tell you I'm going into harness again, and a trap to drag a letter from you. I hope you'll enjoy your sea.

Her next appearance at the Olympic, of which I have any record, is that for Mrs. Wigan's Benefit, on June 22, 1855, as "Lady Teazle." She was getting rather too old for the part,[1] but brought back with her, nevertheless,

all her accustomed vivacity and finesse, and never looked better than in the stately dress of the last century. . . . The point of the dialogue was duly given by her delivery, and that is no small praise in an age when the art of wielding the language of polished repartee is fast fading away. Emery, as "Sir Peter," and the others scarcely recognize the subtleties of that artificial comedy dialogue, which belong to another time, but which lies within the reach of Mrs. Stirling's quick discernment.[2]

The fact is, that the players, as a company, were rather far out of their ordinary line, namely drawing-room comedy, and domestic drama, varied with farce, in which the Olympic was building up for itself the reputation of being the leading London house, in that class of work.

Over Mrs. Stirling's performances there during the last half of the year 1855,[3] and the year 1856, I do not propose to linger. On July 2, 1855, she played in "Where there's a Will there's a Way." On February 12, 1856, as "Mrs. Metcalfe," she helped to give a little life to an otherwise flat comedy by G. H. Lewes, disguised as "Slingsby Lawrence"; and on May 26 she took up again the part in which she had appeared at the Lyceum in 1847—"Mrs. Bracegirdle," "The Tragedy Queen." My grandmother always enjoyed playing actresses, because such rôles gave her more opportunity to make use of her elocutionary powers than most drawing-room dramas afforded. Always fond of recitation, she just revelled in the tragedy speeches, and

[1] Born July 29, 1813—therefore nearly forty-two.
[2] *The Times*, June 23, 1855.
[3] On September 1, 1855, Bartholomew Fair was proclaimed for the last time.

MRS. STIRLING'S FATHER, CAPTAIN HEHL.

MRS. STIRLING, ABOUT 1856.

[*Photo: London Stereoscopic Company.*

To face p 160.

it was her delight in them, no doubt, together with her need for more rest, that turned her mind little by little towards an alternative occupation, which, while suited to her taste and abilities, would tax her physique less than would play-acting upon the legitimate stage.

Two more rôles, during 1856, I have noted—the lead in "Wives as They Were and Maids as They Are," by Mrs. Inchbald, and "Miss Dorrillon," with Robson, in "A Conjugal Lesson." Then, on February 19, 1857, she was seen as "Anne Carew," in another domestic drama by Tom Taylor, "A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing,"[1] which takes us to Taunton, after Sedgemoor, in 1685, when Kirke's Lambs were loose about the West Country, and rebel fruit, of King Monmouth's army, dangled from the sign-boards of the Somerset Inns.

One would naturally suppose that a play upon such a theme would be English through and through; and that a week spent at the "White Hart," Taunton, with wanderings about the vale of Sedgemoor, were the inspirations that set Taylor to work. Such, however, was not the method of our dramatists of the fifties. At the head of the printed play we read, as usual, "from the French." Taylor, almost wholly deficient in natural creative power, had done no more than adapt to his purpose Mme. de Girardin's "Une Femme qui Déteste son Mari."

The play, nevertheless, is a deft piece of work, and with the help of a new historical setting, and broad Somerset dialogue, does effectually conceal its first nationality from all those to whom the purposeful coquetry of "Anne Carew" does not suggest a French origin. Its story is of the simplest. "Anne Carew" has concealed her husband, whom people suppose to have fallen at Sedgemoor, while fighting upon Monmouth's side. "Colonel Percy Kirke" (Addison) is making to her advances that she pretends to welcome. "Jasper Carew" (Vining), and his wife's faithful duplicity, come of course to light at last; but the sudden appearance of "Lord Churchill" puts an end to "Kirke's" command, before he has had time to revenge himself; and the curtain falls upon the reunited pair, to the jingle of

[1] A play in which the Kendals later on made a great success.

the rhyming tags, without which Taylor thought no comedy complete.

Such a part, with a play within a play, was exactly suited to Mrs. Stirling's talent. *The Times*[1] critic writes that she,

> though perhaps hardly realizing all that was expected from her, in consequence of the memory of her many successes in previous parts of the kind, still endowed the character with that vivid force of expression that told strongly upon the audience. The transitions, from the playful assumptions of love for the hated destroyer of her friends, to the earnest devotion that she exhibits to her husband, were marked by the skilful employment of those talents in which she has yet scarce a rival.

On March 4, however, when the play was yet only a fortnight old, Mrs. Stirling, seized with sudden illness, was compelled to resign her part to Mrs. Alfred Wigan, and—excepting a visit to Edinburgh Theatre Royal, where Henry Irving was acting, and an appearance during August, in a farce, "The Subterfuge," on the occasion of the reopening of the theatre, under Robson and Emden's management—did not, I think, take up any heavy work, until October, when, on the 19th, she reappeared in a typical Olympic comedy of the time, "Leading Strings," by A. C. Troughton, from "Toujours," the last but one of the interminable list of plays to the credit of the French dramatist, Scribe.

"Mrs. Leveson," a widow, played by Mrs. Stirling, dotes upon her son, and would marry him to her niece "Florry." The boy, however, has conceived a passion for the proud, selfish, high-born "Edith," who lives with them. Her he will absolutely possess—"aut 'Edith' aut nullus," as Edmund Kean would have put it. The shrewd, designing mother, knowing well her boy's character, pretends to give way, and astutely contrives that "Frank" and "Edith" shall be bottled up, for weeks together, at a dull old country house in the North of England, there to feast upon one another's charms. The result, of course, is surfeit, followed, in due time, by loathing and fast. The lively and ingenuous "Florry" is then introduced at

[1] February 22, 1857.

the critical moment; "Edith" finds solace elsewhere; and the mother's triumph, and her son's happiness, are simultaneously accomplished. Simple stuff, this, depending wholly upon interpretation for effect, it proved, nevertheless, to be one of the most successful of Mrs. Stirling's long list of characters.

Her natural and earnest style [says the critic of the *Era*[1]] gave to the portrait of the watchful and contriving mother those vivid colours that only the absolute mistress of her art could have employed so dexterously. Her "Mrs. Leveson" will be fit to hang on the walls of memory beside those other pictures that belong to the famous gallery of comedy portraits limned so cleverly by the same hand.

Mrs. Stirling, as the mother, exhibits one of the most finished and sustained pieces of drawing-room acting that has been seen in London for some years; and, from one end to the other, her part is excellent.[2]

The run of "Leading Strings," like that of "A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing," was cut short—so far as Mrs. Stirling was concerned—by another illness. On November 23 she broke down suddenly, and her part was read by Miss Castleton. From that time forward the actress felt herself unequal to the strain of long-sustained theatrical work, and made less frequent appearances upon the stage. She continued to tour, at intervals, though not very willingly. February 1858 finds her at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, from the 1st to the 6th; at the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, from the 8th to the 13th; and back at Glasgow from the 15th to the 20th, where she played with Glover in "The Jealous Wife," "A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing," and "Subterfuge." "The Tragedy Queen" and "Masks and Faces" were also included in the repertoire of that tour.

From one of these towns, probably, was written, to Mrs. Baylis, a letter of which I give a fragment here. It shows, only too plainly, that the long-drawn dilemma between duty and daughter was still agitating her mind.

Ah! my child! you think me free to fly here and there and there! you don't see all the different strings that pull me here and there! and the chain cable that holds my heart tightly in one place while my wretched body is dragged here and there, to toil on as it can without it! all to make these pounds, shillings and pence that I cannot

[1] October 25, 1857. [2] *Saturday Review*, October 31, 1857.

enjoy when made. I have a dreadful cold, there is no getting warm through; here I sit in shawls and fur shoes over my boots, and yet shiver, and my landlady is an old maid, oh! so cold!—it's all cold and wretched together. I write and tell a friend of mine to leave you a Scotch paper or two which you will keep for me, as they are to go in the London Press. It must have been a Mrs. Gillett, I fancy, you met at my house, an enthusiastic little woman, like yourself, who has the happy gift of words. If you send here again it must not be after Friday's post, as there's no delivery here on the "Sabbath"—eh, mon! oh! M! you may drink and fight and murder, be a beast in any way, but you mustn't have your letters or travel, so I shall be shut up here Sunday, but off on Monday before the post comes. Hoping to see you, dear, very soon,

Believe me yours truly,
F. S.

Not consideration of health only, then, was the cause for her gradual withdrawal from the stage. The first sentence of the above letter supplies a reason more potent. Still, however, with the stubborn determination that she could always summon at command, Mrs. Stirling remained, for the time being, a faithful servant of the Olympic management, appearing, on April 19, as "Mrs. Flowerdale," in Oxenford's comedy, "A Doubtful Victory," and, during the autumn of the same year, as "Mrs. Bergmann," the housekeeper, in a gloomy play of crime and lunacy, by that melodramatic writer, Wilkie Collins.

"The Red Vial" proved commercially a failure; in part because it was utterly unsuited to the tastes of an Olympic audience, and in part because of Robson's comparative weakness in a purely tragic rôle—most of the critics laying the bulk of the blame upon him. The really interesting point of the production was the conclusive proof it afforded that, of the two comedians, Robson and Mrs. Stirling, upon whom the fortunes of the house mainly depended, the actor could not, or did not, succeed in tragedy, while the actress could, and did. As the *Saturday Review* put it:

If Mr. Robson[1] had felt a real sympathy with the half-shrewd idiot entrusted to his talent, he might have rendered him a conspicuous

[1] The following interesting passage concerning Robson, and his work in this play, is from Hollingshead's *My Lifetime*, i. 127, 128.
"... 'The Red Vial' was a decided failure, and it was the fashion

and commanding figure amid the general dullness, as indeed the murderous housekeeper was made by Mrs. Stirling!

Her "Mrs. Bergmann" was generally regarded as "the most brilliant failure of the day."

Mrs. Stirling, in the manifestly repulsive part of "Mrs. Bergmann," adopts the bold expedient of idealizing the would-be murderess into a sort of "Lady Macbeth," and by the imposing character of her attitudes, and the force of her by-play, gives a poetical aspect to the piece, which would not otherwise have belonged to it.[1]

The *Daily Telegraph* went farther yet in commendation, and paid full tribute to the actress's "noble effort" to save the play from failure, adding further that

her acting was such as cannot fail to heighten the fame she has established, great though it be, and to raise her in the estimation of her most ardent admirers.[2]

There is little doubt that in "The Red Vial"[3]—poor though the play was—Mrs. Stirling reached the climax of her serious powers, and came closer to high tragedy than she had done, even in "Adrienne Lecouvreur." Her performance arouses curiosity, as to what she might have accomplished in "Lady Macbeth," had the opportunity ever been afforded to her, in the days of her dramatic maturity.

to throw the blame upon Robson. I was present the first night with Mr. Serjeant Ballantyne, and we could not honestly abuse anything but the piece: nothing could have saved 'The Red Vial.' Robson died a few years later of dipsomania. He was a little nervous man, with a large head and a small body; his legs and feet were particularly neat. He was a bundle of nerves. When he spoke to you and shook hands, they were damp with perspiration; when he acted, on a first night, he was sick after nearly every scene. No one knows the agony of the stage, except those who are on it. His tragedy was terrific for a few minutes, and his lapses into common-place most comic and startling. His style was his own. He made his first hit in my friend Frank Talfourd's burlesque of 'Shylock.' Mme. Ristori has left on record her astonishment on seeing his travesty of 'Medea'—her own 'Medea.' . . . He was one of the most humorous and original farce actors—unlike any of the popular low comedians—and could breathe the breath of eccentric life into the vulgarest comic song. His nervousness made him doubt his own staying powers."

[1] *The Times*, October 12, 1858.

[2] Blanchard, present on the first night, wrote in his diary: "Mrs. Stirling wonderfully fine."

[3] "The Red Vial" is perhaps a forerunner of the French naturalistic play. Zola, one of the founders of French naturalism, was to write his first successful book, *Thérèse Raquin*, in 1867. *L'Assommoir*, which made his fortune, appeared in 1878.

Apart from the attraction of two strong parts, for Robson and the leading lady, one wonders what were the managers'[1] reasons for producing such a play as "The Red Vial" at the Olympic, a house that, after the Princess's—where Charles Kean was putting on spectacular Shakespearean revivals with considerable success—was admittedly the second theatre in London, and a fashionable resort of comedy-seeking play-goers.

For these ventures in domestic comedy, Wigan—and Robson, with Emden who succeeded him—had brought together and trained a company, of whom few, excepting Mrs. Stirling, had any claim to celebrity, before the days of Wigan's management. But now, by the autumn of 1858, they had "come on" so fast, and were so well together, that no theatre in London could rival them at this class of work. Mrs. Stirling, as we have seen, had reached, at the Olympic, a degree of popularity not excelled at any period of her career; Robson had made himself the leading burlesque actor of the day; Addison, in such parts as the old butler in "Leading Strings," and the East Indian fire-eater in "Going to the Bad"; and lastly Vining, in character sketches, such as the rough military lover of "A Doubtful Victory," and as "Jasper Carew" in Taylor's "after-Sedgemoor" play, had brought the comedian's art, each after his manner, to a high degree of perfection, and the house into great repute.

On September 24, 1859, then, the little Olympic, still under Robson and Emden, reopened for the autumn season, with a new version of de Musset's comedy, "Il faut qu'une Porte soit Ouverte ou Fermée," or in English dress, "A Morning Call." Mrs. Stirling did well in it, as she did also in the plays that followed: "The Head of the Family"; a revival of her old triumph, "Cousin Cherry"; and "Nine Points of the Law," in which she appeared before the Court, at Windsor Castle, on January 31, 1860.

A popular magazine, *The Players*, published during the following month[2] an appreciative article commenting

[1] Robson and W. S. Emden, as joint managers, had succeeded Wigan.
[2] February 25, 1860.

upon Mrs. Stirling's extraordinary versatility. Its readers were reminded that

> it is by no means uncommon to meet with persons who, remembering her impersonations of "Juliet," "Cordelia," "Desdemona," etc., prefer them to those of any other lady upon the stage.

Others thought her best in domestic drama, while some ranked her highest in the lighter, more dainty, French style of part. Certainly, as proof of her scope and variety, it was a most remarkable fact that she played a far greater range of character *after* being established in public favour, as a leading comedy actress, than she had ever done before. How many other comédiennes in theatrical history, for example, have been capable of sending every young lady in the house into floods of tears over sorrows considered obsolete for years—such as the griefs of "Clarissa Harlowe"?

Yet, all the while, beneath the merriment of her lightest work, the brooding melancholy was there, undreamed of, doubtless, by the many, but discerned, or suspected, by the more penetrating of her sympathizers. One such, perhaps, was the writer of the following lines, which aroused comment, at this time, by their association of the pale-dark companion, Melancholy, with the bright and cheery creator of "Peg Woffington."

> With eyes upraised and ringlets curling,
> Pale Melancholy (Mrs. Stirling)
> Comes from behind the prompter's seat
> Her lamentations to repeat;
> And while she pours her pensive cries
> On all the wings and flats around
> There is an echo in the flies,
> That seems to mock the mournful sound.
> Through box and pit the plaintive accents stole;
> Hung o'er the orchestra with fond delay;
> Through all the house a calm diffusing—
> The sounds not e'en the gallery losing—
> Till in the slips they die away.

That Mrs. Stirling's devotion to her art was becoming, to some extent, vicarious, all theatre-goers were now to know, when her daughter Fanny—the "Little Fan" of the

letters to Mrs. Baylis—then in her nineteenth year, made her first appearance upon the West-End stage.[1]

The occasion was at Drury Lane Theatre, on July 25, 1860, at a benefit arranged for the family of R. B. Brough, who had died not long before. Actors from three different theatres gave their services that night, and G. A. Sala spoke an address, specially written by himself. These preliminaries took up so much time that it was near midnight before the most important item of the programme came on, namely, "The Enchanted Island," a burlesque of Shakespeare's "Tempest," written by Robert Brough, in collaboration with his brother and other dramatists.

Before the curtain a prologue, written by Shirley Brookes, for the occasion, was spoken by Mrs. Stirling. Then followed the burlesque, played mainly by amateurs,[2] many of whom were members of the Savage Club. Miss Ellen Terry's elder sister, Kate Terry—described by Charles Reade as the meekest, tenderest, and most intelligent actress of her day—was "Ariel"; and Fanny Stirling, the younger, made her début as "Miranda."

> The appearance of Miss Fanny Stirling as "Miranda" fully answered the most sanguine expectations. Endowed with remarkable personal attractions, the young lady acts and sings with native vivacity and spirit, accompanied by an amount of grace and self-possession that could only be acquired through careful training. The acting of the amateurs may be recorded as exceedingly creditable, but there is real importance in the accession to the stage of so promising a young actress as Fanny Stirling.[3]

On Monday, January 7, 1861, Miss Fanny Stirling played again at Drury Lane, in her first important part, "Miss Vandeleur," in Falconer's comedy, "Does He Love Me?" a performance concerning which the *Athenæum* critic wrote:

> Miss Stirling has great natural powers, and merely requires cultivation in the art which she has chosen to realize a decided success.

[1] She had begun by "walking on," dressed in a scarlet cloak, in a play with the Wigans about three years before.

[2] "Ferdinand," Miss Woolgar (Mrs. Alfred Mellon); "Trinculo," John Hollingshead; "Stephano," George Cruickshank; "Caliban," Mr. Frank Talfourd. "Miranda" was described on the play-bill as "Prospero's pet and Ferdinand's passion"—which gives a clue to the crudity of the text.

[3] *The Times*, July 26, 1860.

Her portraiture of the heroine was exceedingly natural, full of girlish impulse, and occasionally revealing extraordinary powers of fascination. In person and style she much resembles her mother, and in time will probably become as attractive an actress.

All this was well enough for a beginning; and from that time onward, until her second début—if I may call it so—the daughter appeared, with a fair measure of success, at various West-End theatres, in several plays—among which was "She Stoops to Conquer"—before her first appearance in a full-dress comedy, with her mother also in the cast.

The date was March 6, 1861,[1] the play, at the Haymarket, "A Duke in Difficulties," specially written by Tom Taylor for the Stirlings, from a tale published some years before in *Blackwood*, entitled, "A Duke in a Dilemma." Its original source was, I believe, a German novel, and one rather regrets that the story ever left Germany, since its morals were doubtful, and its interest but small. Briefly the tale is this:

A German princeling, short of money, receives at his court a number of French actors, for whom he has made no provision. The French manager, an alert individual, proposes that they shall all become courtiers, and so enable the princeling fittingly to receive a neighbouring prince, whose wealthy sister he hopes to marry. *Ainsi dit, ainsi fait!* The duke jumps at the idea, appoints the manager his prime minister *pro tem.*, and hands portfolios to the remainder of the travelling company. Ultimately the duke marries the princess, who, of course, restores his shattered finances, while the actors—their identities always undiscovered—are despatched upon foreign missions, so as to allow the real courtiers to leave the state prison, in which they had been languishing, and return to their normal inactivities. The visiting prince, meanwhile, falls in love with one of the actresses, "Colombe" (Miss Fanny Stirling) whose actress-mother (Mrs. Stirling) has to guard her daughter as best she may.

[1] Sir Squire Bancroft has told me that in this same year, 1861, he ran away from home, and went on the stage—in his twentieth year, I think. He began at the Theatre Royal, Birmingham.

Such a plot, well handled, might have made a good comedy, and should have afforded excellent opportunities for the two ladies principally concerned. Unfortunately, it was badly written. Taylor, for want of time, or want of care, bungled the thing; and so overloaded his second and third acts with irrelevant dialogue, that the comedy became tedious and wearisome, despite the interest aroused by, and the pointed allusions in the text to, the first—and the last—appearance of the Stirlings together. The reception, by press and public alike, was, on the whole, unfavourable, notwithstanding the special circumstances, and the strength of the cast, which included Howe, Buckstone, Compton, Rogers, and Mrs. Wilkins.

> The mother [wrote the critic of *The Times*][1] is represented with great feeling by Mrs. Stirling . . . and the final speeches which she utters when she leads her daughter to the foot-lamps evidently refer to the recent début of Miss Fanny Stirling, and were understood in that sense by the audience, who applauded them with enthusiasm.

The *Era* also realized the significance of the occasion:

> It was impossible not to feel the full force of the earnestness of expression with which Mrs. Stirling, as the experienced actress, "Joconde," depicted the perils of life to the young actress, "Colombe," her daughter; and the anxiety for her future welfare, displayed with all that depth of emotional feeling that we know, in this instance, was not the mere proof of the artist's skill, was thoroughly appreciated by the audience, who gladly bestowed encouraging plaudits as often as they were invited, and, truth to say, they were invited pretty frequently. Miss Fanny Stirling was seen to more advantage in this part than in any she has previously undertaken . . . still, notwithstanding that one of Mr. Tom Taylor's usual rhymed tags brought the curtain down to applause, elicited by the pointed utterance of a strong appeal which Mrs. Stirling made on behalf of her daughter, we must doubt if the piece has sufficient vitality to ensure it long life.

It certainly had not. The production was a mistake; and my mother soon after left the stage, with which, despite fine physical and mental qualifications, she had never, I think, possessed much real sympathy, nor shown any deep natural instinct. The elder lady also, at this

[1] March 8, 1861.

time, withdrew temporarily from public life, at the height of her popularity, and with a reputation equalled by few actresses in the history of our English theatre.[1]

In *The Modern Drama*, of 1862, appeared the following lines concerning Mrs. Stirling:

No living actress can approach her in comedy. Unless we except a somewhat inelegant walk, she combines every qualification to produce a matchless embodiment of the piquant, the high-bred, the witty heroines of the old drama. Her voice is soft and pleasing, capable at once of sweetness and acerbity; her face is essentially womanly, tender, gentle, refined; her vigorous understanding knows how to give point to the wit of her author, pathos to his melancholy, emphasis to his satire, and illumination to his obscurity.

[1] CHARACTERISTICS OF ACTRESSES, from Diprose's *The Stage and The Players*.

Helen Faucit is ideal,
Mrs. Stirling is most real;
Isabella Glyn is strong,
Mrs. Kean is seldom wrong.
Graceful, fair Miss Vandenhoff,
Charlotte Cushman somewhat gruff.
Mrs. Keeley always clever,
Wee Miss Saunders, live for ever!
Edith Heraud, poet's daughter,
Amy Sedgwick—Nature taught her.
Genius smiled on Fanny Kemble,
Shall we genius' faults dissemble?
Rare the genius, rare and great,
When will such rise again, O Fate?

CHARACTERISTICS OF ACTORS, from the same.

Samuel Phelps is good and ready,
Old John Cooper always steady;
Mr. Kean, an artiste—Dutch!—
Anderson is never such.
Robson, clever, shrewd, and fine,
Wigan in French parts doth shine;
Webster is so good—and yet
Walter Lacy betters it.
Charles Mathews, rattling, free,
Don, Sir William, six feet three,
Many good and hardly great,
But, in a transition state,
We must take what we can get,
And past greatness must forget.

BETA.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ADELPHI, AND SOME SPEECHES

1861–68

The General Theatrical, and Dramatic and Musical Sick Funds—Ladies relegated to galleries at these dinners—Protests from Chairmen and Revocation of the Edict—Mrs. Stirling's first reply from the ladies—Her gift of public speaking—Northern tour, and letters thereon—"A lost life"—The demands of art upon the artist—Contemplated withdrawal—Return to the Adelphi in "Hen and Chickens," 1863—Mrs. Stirling at the Royal Mint—Her speech at Dramatic and Musical Sick Fund Dinner in 1864—"A Woman of Business," and a drink play—Her success as "Marguerite" in "The Workmen of Paris"—Her speech on St. Valentine's Day, 1865—"The Huguenot Captain"—"From Grave to Gay"—A long withdrawal in 1868.

THE theatrical profession is certainly a precarious one, and, upon the whole, underpaid. Its members, moreover, being, in many instances, individually more generous than provident, cases of grievous necessity too often arise.

In 1839 had been established the General Theatrical Fund, for the provision of pensions to old actors; but, as the need for help grew with the development of the theatre, there was founded, in 1855, a kindred organization, for the relief of sickness and distresses among the profession. It was named, somewhat clumsily, "The Dramatic, Musical and Equestrian Sick Fund Association," of which the first annual dinner was held on April 9, 1857, at Willis's Rooms,[1] in St. James's Street.

There Tom Taylor presided over a comparatively small meeting, at which no ladies were present, excepting perhaps a few in the gallery, as tantalized spectators and listeners, forbidden either to speak or eat. Woman's emancipation

[1] Fanny Kemble (Frances Anne Kemble, 1809-93) had given a series of Shakespearean readings there in 1848; Thackeray also lectured there successfully, after moments of paralysing nervousness, as related by Fanny Kemble in her *Records of Later Life*.

had not proceeded far in those days; nor was it, I believe, then the general custom to admit ladies to public dinners, even though—as was the case with members of the theatrical profession—those ladies were publicly exercising their art, and earning their bread, upon the same boards with the men. The boards were open to the ladies; the board was not.

For some years this anomaly was permitted to continue. At the second meeting, with Ben Webster in the chair; at the third under Robert Keeley; at the fourth under Thackeray—on Ash Wednesday, February 22, 1860—the unfortunate women were still relegated hungrily to the gallery, though their healths were cursorily proposed at the very close of the proceedings, when everybody was tired, and those who had not already left were preparing to do so.

At the meetings of the General Theatrical Fund, the same sort of thing was happening, and the absence of the actresses began annually to be commented upon. Tom Taylor, presiding at their dinner, on April 12, 1860, in proposing "The Ladies," at 11.30 p.m., said: "I do so in the confident hope that the time is not long distant when ladies and gentlemen will take their places side by side, and that the ladies will not be content with a miserable toast at the fag-end of the evening."

As regards the elder, and more conservative, charity, however, the change was long in coming; and at their functions, held usually at the Freemason's Tavern, Great Queen Street, the fact that the ladies were still in the gallery, behind the men and a grill, became the subject of annual sentiment, jest, or remonstrance, according to the temperaments of the speakers. Alfred Wigan, on April 16, 1862, "heard a downy rustle that could not have proceeded from coarse masculine broadcloth and leather, but which, I am convinced, must have been caused by those lighter, lovelier fabrics that veil the iron cages which, in the present day, contain those delicate creatures whom some of us have the happiness to call ours."

Dickens, at the next dinner, found himself in a tantalizing position. "I always want to look this way (*facing*

the ladies) and I am obliged to look this (*facing the gentlemen*). Also I never have so painful a sense that my hair is going a little behind." The Lord Mayor of London, presiding in 1866, complains, for the same reason, of a stiff neck; and Dion Boucicault, in 1867, affirms publicly, that "this is the first time that ever he turned his back upon a lady."

The younger Institution, meanwhile—The Dramatic Sick Fund—had set their house in order, long before. At their dinner on Ash Wednesday, March 5, 1862, under the presidency of Sir Charles Taylor, ladies were admitted, for the first time, on equal terms with the men; and Mrs. Stirling, accompanied by Miss Fanny Stirling, came down from the gallery to the dining table, and responded to the toast of "The Ladies."

Sir Charles Taylor, Ladies and Gentlemen,—I have presided—how long ago I don't perhaps care to remember—as Mrs. Fitz-Smythe over a Ladies' Club,[1] but I am now called upon to perform a still more original part, that of spokeswoman for the ladies present, and actually dining at a public dinner. I think the Dramatic Association deserves credit for this innovation, which allows us to be comfortably seated at this table, instead of being ranged drearily up in a gallery, like so many cherubim sitting aloft, keeping watch over the knives and forks of poor Jack. (Laughter.) In the name of the ladies present I beg to thank you for this change in the order of your dining. I do not think that the presence of the petticoats—however, perhaps, in their present form, they may a little cripple the legs of the gentlemen—need cripple their eloquence nor check their joviality, except perhaps at those points where it were none the worse for being checked.

But for other and graver reasons I am both proud and happy in acknowledging the toast on behalf of my professional sisters. If the men find the pathway of theatrical art a rugged and difficult one, think what it must be, or rather, I should say, what it is, for the women! (Hear, hear.) If you, with your thews and sinews, born to buffet the world and fight your way, often have need of a helping hand o'er this rugged bit of road, and are still apt to stumble and founder, think what it must be for young, weak, inexperienced and too often unfriended and unprotected woman! (Cheers.) Oh! what heart-sickening disappointment, what pinching need, what terrible temptations might perhaps be averted by a kind hand, with just a little money in it, held out to them at the critical moment! (Cheers.)

And if I turn from the difficulties which now and then beset the

[1] March 20, 1840, at Olympic "The Ladies' Club," by Mark Lemon. See *ante*, p. 16.

path of health, and strength, and youth, to the more dreary privations which are so often the lot of age and sickness, in a calling so precarious as ours, oh, what sad reason has the poor old worn-out actress to bless such a Society as this, which provides for her sick-bed those comforts which she is unable to provide for herself, and—when all other offices of friendship, save the last, are superfluous—soothes her death-bed pillow, and saves her from a pauper's grave. (Hear, hear.)

You will forgive me, I hope, for intruding such sad words on this occasion, but there appear special reasons why the women in our profession should take an interest in this Charity, and it seemed to me that in acknowledging this toast they might not be altogether out of place. In the name of all the ladies, I beg to return you our most grateful thanks for the honour you have done us, and allow me in return to drink all your healths. (Loud applause.)

Whether Mrs. Stirling was making here her début as an after-dinner speaker, or whether she possessed previous experience, I do not know, but the lofty tone of the speech, its ease, pathos, eloquence, and no doubt, the grace, truth, and technical excellence of its delivery, made this first effort a complete success. From that time forth, until 1880, with only occasional absences, Mrs. Stirling either responded for the ladies at these functions, or took charge of the toast of the evening. Within a few years she had established herself as the leading speaker for the Fund, on behalf of which she must have collected, during those two decades, several thousands of pounds.

This faculty of public speaking was only another example of Mrs. Stirling's quite unusual versatility. Actors and actresses, in general, do not make very facile orators. In her own words,[1] they "generally draw upon the author for speech currency," and so find themselves somewhat at a loss, when thrown back upon their own inventiveness. Not so with this lady. Her roving eye, swift intelligence, and wide human sympathies supplied her readily with all necessary material. Her method of preparing a speech—as may be seen by a glance at the back numbers of the *Era*, in addition to those in the text—was to take sundry topics of the time—a political event, a *cause célèbre*, a social function, or whatever else might serve her turn—

[1] February 10, 1864.

to extract from them analogies, verbal and other, with the cause she was pleading, and so adroitly to shape the subject to her ultimate purpose—the acquisition of money for the fund.

To the accomplishment of this end she brought all her feminine art, and woman's artifice. Rich humour, and tender pathos; subtle *mutinerie*, and easy grace; worldly knowledge, and simple truth; personal fascination, and acquired power, were all in turn laid under contribution, and used with the trained skill that had already raised her so high in her profession. When reading her best speeches, one feels instinctively that she possessed, on the platform as on the stage, the essential and incommunicable faculty of open-heartedness, which alone can put a speaker at once upon good terms with an audience, and bring them immediately into mutual confidence.

The chief fault of her speeches, it seems, was her common failure to make enough use of incidents that had occurred during the evening, thus conveying, to the more thoughtful hearers, the impression that the discourse was either learned by heart, or at least fully prepared, before the speaker sat down to dine. We know, of course, that almost every after-dinner speech is so prepared; but, by the exercise of a little contrivance, that fact can be screened, if not concealed, from all but the acutest hearers.

At the dinner of February 18, 1863, over which G. A. Sala presided, Mrs. Stirling was not present, she being then busy with preparations for a northern tour, which opened at the Prince of Wales's, Liverpool, on March 16, when "every nook and cranny of the theatre was crammed by legions of her loyal and admiring subjects," come to see her play during the fortnight of her engagement, in "Masks and Faces," "Nine Points of the Law," "The Tragedy Queen," and "The Ladies' Battle."

There all went well; but when she opened at the Queen's, Edinburgh, on April 13, a different tale had to be told. The boxes were almost vacant, and though there was a fair gathering in pit and gallery, the house, as a whole, was only half full. A similarly cool reception had recently been accorded to the Wigans and Charles Mathews. During

this visit Mrs. Stirling wrote to Mrs. Baylis, on or about April 16, 1868:

38, Albany Street,
Edinburgh.

My Dear Mrs. Baylis,

I shall feel ever so many years younger to be talking and writing to you again, only mind, if I bestow my tediousness upon you, you, who have more and better things to do, are not bound to answer.

What would you suffer if you saw the theatre here! I have just come from Liverpool, where all was a sort of triumph—house packed nightly—manager a liberal, practical man—and I come to this fine city, find a large, beautiful theatre perfectly empty—manager out of repute, deserted by actors and audience. Poor "Peg"! In Liverpool all was like a flash of lightning, and here—however, I just send you a paper or two to let you see I am not exaggerating. They prophesy it will pick up! Yes! just as I'm going they'll be beginning to think they'll come some night. It's aggravating here in this beautiful place, which looks just now bright and light, like a continental town, and where people should be to match. Thursday week I go to Glasgow—things are much dirtier and darker, but 'tis to be hoped more "jolly" there.

You remember the Glovers? You know that Glover died? that the Royal has since been burnt,[1] reducing poor Mrs. Glover's money terribly? Julia, the eldest daughter, married wretchedly (of course), separation and quarrels after but a few months. I don't know if I sent you Liverpool papers. I am glad you've told me of Mrs. Trench's book,[2] I shall get it in Glasgow. I liked one or two extracts I had seen from it, but for some months I've been kept in too great a state of irritation and distress to care about anything. I must begin to interest myself about others, and throw myself thoro'ly into my work, or leave it altogether. I waver as to which is best. I look back and see what a lost life mine has been! how if I'd thrown myself into my art as I ought to have done, how it would have repaid me in every way. There ought to be no family—no ties—no anything but a sort of priesthood of art or to it (I don't know which is grammar) and then it repays you. This is all twaddle to be put in the fire and for no eye but your own, but I thought you'd like a line of some kind from

F. S.

[1] Glover died in 1860. The Theatre Royal, Glasgow, was burned before daybreak on January 31, 1863, after the pantomime "Blue-Beard," when all the scenery, wardrobes, armoury, and musical and theatrical libraries—one of the largest provincial collections—was destroyed. The building was insured for £9,000, and effects for £3,000, but neither amount was sufficient to cover the loss. When the above letter was written Mr. Edmund Glover was lessee of the Royal, and of the Prince's, Glasgow.

[2] I suppose, Mary Caroline Trench, author of *A Box of Ointment* (1851) and *Little Richard* (1861). This latter may be the book referred to.

This pathetic outpouring, intended only for the eye of an intimate friend—and written, no doubt, like so many others—partly with the object of eliciting a sympathetic response—is in striking contrast with Mrs. Stirling's naturally cheery and optimistic humour, as revealed in her comedy acting, and in her later public speeches. The cause of her "irritation and distress," at this time, is to be found, I think, chiefly—as indeed she almost hints—in the impending marriage of her daughter to the writer's father, who, though a man of noble character, and very great business ability, was not artist enough to possess either interest in, or sympathy with, the theatre. The immediate result of the marriage—a very happy and prosperous one—was a complete and permanent breach of relations between mother and daughter, who, after the separation, met no more, nor were ever reconciled.

As regards Mrs. Stirling's lament over her "lost life"—the life that she might have found, had she consecrated herself wholly to her art—what can one say, with all respect and sympathy, except that the statement was, in a measure, true? While looking over this record, we feel convinced—and we may haply have convinced some readers—that it had been in Mrs. Stirling's power to win for herself that which it had once been Charles Reade's aspiration to help her to win—a place upon the loftiest pinnacles of histrionic fame. But Art is an exacting mistress. Though she require—as the sculptor, M. Bourdelle, phrased it to the writer—"une longue initiation," she demands equally, as sequel, a long and perfect consecration. Mrs. Stirling gave the one, and reaped a corresponding reward. The other she was too much the woman, too much the mother, wholly to give: and it was not until too late that she realized the futility of compromise, and the imperative necessity of deliberate choice between two incompatible devotions.

This tour of 1863 ended, on May 8, at Glasgow, where Mrs. Stirling took her benefit, at the Prince's Theatre, with "The Ladies' Battle," and "The Tragedy Queen." Thence she wrote to her friend:

145, West Campbell Street,
Glasgow.

Only time for a line to tell you you must have mistaken the title of the book you told me to read—*Nut Brown Maids*. I got it Saturday, and feel certain 'tis not what you meant. There's no old woman in it. It's about Queen Bess, with a tedious affectation of the old style—tiresome to the last degree. Mrs. Trench I'm to have to-morrow.

Do you know of anything *dramatic*—a sort of semi "sensation" drama? The difficulty is that I am not young and lovely. "East Lynne"[1] has been suggested, if we could get over the difficulty of the cause of her running away. Can you suggest anything?

Mrs. Stirling's doubts, as to whether she should continue her stage life, were over by the summer. On August 24, 1863, she accepted an engagement at the Adelphi, under Ben Webster, to undertake the lead in "Hen and Chickens," a domestic comedy from the French, by Ben Webster junior. She had a warm reception from a full house, and

acted with all that natural vivacity and refined grace and feeling which have so long obtained for her the deserved admiration of the public. The overflowing of maternal love, excusable in its very excess, could not have been more earnestly depicted, and her occasional touches of unaffected pathos went directly home to the heart.

Thus the *Daily Telegraph*, in its best lyrical style,[2] and other papers followed suit. Her part, "Mrs. Soft Sawderley," was that of

a gently despotic mother-in-law, who stifles and disarms opposition by the use of every wile and artifice known to the feminine mind—a soft-hearted aristocrat, now coaxing and hypocritically deferential, now compelling sympathy by violent displays of emotional grief!

This sort of work had been for years well within her range; and won for her the honours of the evening. Ben Webster led her before the curtain, to take her call; and it was on this occasion, I think, or very soon after, that a certain impulsive and appreciative young lady, sitting among the audience, was heard to exclaim concerning Mrs. Stirling: "Ah! that's what I call an actress!" Her name was Ellen Terry.[3]

[1] Mrs. Henry Wood's novel had been published in 1861.
[2] August 25, 1863.
[3] Then in her sixteenth year.

During these Adelphi days, under Ben Webster, occurred another incident that may as well come in here.

With a party of three or four friends, Mrs. Stirling, one day, visited the Royal Mint. Immediately upon their arrival, Mr. Joseph Newton, Her Majesty's Chief Coiner, recognized the actress, and, without revealing his secret, dismissed the official guide, and himself did the honours of the building, where a coinage of gold was then in progress. When the inspection was over, Mrs. Stirling made a little speech of appreciation and thanks to their guide, who answered, that this was but a small return for the pleasure she had given him upon many occasions.

"Then you knew me when I came to the Mint?"

"Knew you! I was present when you made your first curtsey to a metropolitan audience at the Adelphi Theatre, and played 'Biddy Nutts' in Buckstone's drama, 'The Wreck Ashore'."[1]

"Please do not say how long ago it was, but you are quite correct as to the fact."[2]

"Since that day I have seen you hundreds of times, in an infinite variety of characters, and have admired you in them all!"

"This is indeed fame," murmured the actress, as she thanked him, and said good-bye.

"Yet one moment," said the man of money; "I do not wish you to leave the Mint empty-handed. Will you please accept this small case of Maundy Money, as a memento of your visit?"

"This is really too bad! You make me a presentation of plate; and I, having had no notice of it, have no speech ready in reply. Are you married?"

Newton admitted to a wife and children.

"I will send you a box for the Adelphi, next Friday, when you will see me attempt 'Peg Woffington' in 'Masks and Faces,' which I think the best part I ever played."

[1] He should have said "West-End audience": moreover, the play was not "The Wreck Ashore"—in which she had played at the Pavilion in 1832—it was "A Dream at Sea," the date January 1, 1836. See *ante*, p. 35.

[2] He was not correct. See last note. The anecdote is from the *Era Almanac*.

MRS. STIRLING.

From the Painting by WALTER GOODMAN.

Reproduced by courtesy of the Committee of the Garrick Club.

To face p. 180.

So it was done; and the pair were friends from that day forth.

On February 10, 1864, Mrs. Stirling sat on the right of the chairman, J. B. Buckstone, the veteran author of the play referred to by Mr. Newton, of the Mint—at the Ash Wednesday [1] dinner of the Dramatic and Musical Sick Fund—and replied to the toast of "The Lady Visitors," proposed by Robert Bell.

We all know that we of the theatrical profession do not keep much ready talk about us. We generally draw upon the author for speech currency, and our drafts, or ladies' debts, are generally honoured and paid. I am proud to be your spokeswoman on this occasion. It always seems to me, through the large preponderance of black coats at public dinners, that the gentlemen represent a dark cloud. (Laughter.) Your Committee has been the first to give the dark cloud a silver lining in the shape of the ladies. (Cheers.) Instead of sending poor Jill to that dreary little ladies' gallery, all alone to the cold chicken and sherry, you have brought her down to the good cheer of the table, and Jack ought to feel much happier with his Jill beside him. (Laughter.) By Jill I do not, of course, allude to his half-pints of wine, but only to his guardian angel in crinoline. (Laughter.)

I have lately played in "Hen and Chickens," and I feel to-night that I am going along in the same character. I feel monstrously like an old hen clucking with all her chickens round her, in the shape of my young sisters of the stage, or, as I should call them, our ducks. (Loud cheers.) You are right, gentlemen; that is a more fitting image to express the subject of "Dame Partlett's" affection, the object of her tender anxiety—the brood she sees playing by the water's edge, into which so many poor little chicks have so thoughtlessly plunged. She does not know which of them cannot swim, and her heart flutters with alarm for the safety of her little ones. She only knows the water is deep and dangerous, and she must be fussy and sad at heart in thinking of the horrible perils and sufferings that may be in store for her pretty, bright-winged, and happy looking ducklings. (Cheers.) I thank Heaven there are safeguards and preservations that our foresight cannot but call up before us.

Thus, between stages and speeches, the years passed by. The actress's next part was played, some twelve months later, at the same theatre, in a curtain-raiser, also from

[1] These functions were held on Ash Wednesday, because the Lord Chamberlain had seen fit to close the London theatres upon that day. Despite many and bitter protests—from John Hollingshead in particular—the order remained in force for several years.

the French, by the same author, Ben Webster junior, as a prelude to her "Peg," in "Masks and Faces," which, with "Olivia," in "The Vicar of Wakefield," were still two main items in her repertoire. The piece in question, "A Woman of Business," asked nothing new of her. The interest of the occasion to a modern reader is just this, that she played it in company with the friend—one of the few intimate friends—of Henry Irving, namely J. L. Toole. The famous comedian undertook, on that night, a rôle somewhat outside his usual line, thus moving *The Times* critic to write: "People may require to be told that Mr. J. L. Toole can depict a bumpkin with a South-country dialect, as accurately as he pourtrays a cockney." [1]

A drink-play well written—as Reade, Robertson, Zola, and others have realized—is certain of some popular success. It touches chords of human emotion, and awakens interest in moral problems that come close to the lives of the people: it provides effective contrasts, and dramatic situations, and, withal, affords opportunities for powerful acting, at once humorous and serious. Provided that the author will consent to remain a dramatist, without descending to the mere pamphleteer, he may, if he knows his business, be sure of a run, even though there be no Charles Warner ready to hand.

In such a play, at the Adelphi, Mrs. Stirling next took part.[2] It was from "Les Drames du Cabaret," [3]—("The Workmen of Paris")—written by Adolphe d'Ennery and Dumanoir, for the Porte St. Martin, and was a complete success in London. Ben Webster, as "Von Gratz," gave a great performance—one of the strongest of his career—and, as "Marguerite," Mrs. Stirling was also at her best. Blanchard wrote in his diary, that he was "delighted with it," and the press generally, as well as the public, approved. The following is from the *Daily Telegraph*: [4]

> For intensity of purpose and minute discrimination of character there has been nothing like it, of late, exhibited upon the English stage. Mrs. Stirling had full scope for the display of that earnestness and

[1] *The Times*, August 31, 1854.
[2] November 30, 1864.
[3] Another forerunner of the naturalist drama.
[4] December 1, 1864.

natural emotion, of which she is so complete a mistress. . . . Throughout the performance the most unequivocal indications of the deep interest taken by the audience were abundantly manifested, and the curtain fell amid loud and prolonged applause.

During 1865 Mrs. Stirling rested, or occupied herself principally with teaching, which, in view of her gradual retirement from the stage, was engaging more and more of her time. March 1, however, found her again at her post, on the occasion of the ninth anniversary dinner of the Dramatic Fund. Her speech by no means reached her usual level of excellence; but the one she delivered on Valentine's Day of the year following, 1866, was a great improvement, and was in a degree towards her happiest vein. The speaker stood on the right hand of Dickens, who was in the chair. On his left sat Miss Howard, and next to her Serjeant Ballantyne, to whom Mrs. Stirling was later to make witty reference, when the Tichborne Case was London's only theme. Dickens introduced her thus:

It is the privilege of this Society annually to hear a lady speak for her own sex. Who so competent to do this as Mrs. Stirling? Surely one who has so gracefully and so captivatingly, with such an exquisite mixture of art, and fancy, and fidelity represented her own sex in innumerable characters, under an infinite variety of phases, cannot fail to represent them well in her own character, especially when it is, amid her many triumphs, the most agreeable of all. I beg to propose to you "The Ladies," and I will couple with that toast the name of Mrs. Stirling.

That lady then replied:

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,—You have thought fit to couple my name with the ladies. Now, for that act I retort by charging you with high treason to Saint Valentine and his day. You are the last man to deserve pardon for the offence, for you have shown by your witty and eloquent allusions that you had the day and its duties fully in your mind. It is treason, I say, to Saint Valentine and his day, to couple anything with the ladies but the gentlemen. And, talking of Saint Valentine—in these days of archæology, ecclesiology, and other ologies—isn't it a great reproach to our learned men that they have not been able to discover why Saint Valentine should be selected as patron of the sweet-hearting and billet-douxing which goes on to-day through the post?

I'll be bound the ladies would not have been so long in finding the reason; indeed, I believe the first lady who ever tried to find it did find it, and, as "Peg Woffington" might say, "Sure, that's myself." I'll tell it you. But mind, I give you all notice, the reporters in particular, that the discovery, like our ghosts and sensation effects, is copyright and patent. No, if it were patent anybody might have found it out only they haven't. Well, this is my discovery; I made it by the help of the old lives of the Saints called *The Golden Legend*. It told me first that Saint Valentine was a saint and martyr of the time of Claudius. Now, there seemed something to the point even in that. Most young ladies are disposed to make saints of their sweethearts, and vice versa; and if Valentines lead to the Temple of Hymen, as so many of them do, not a few wives are ready to make martyrs of their husbands, and vice versa.

But that didn't satisfy me. Reading further, I found that Saint Valentine's great miracle was opening a blind young girl's eyes, and then I felt I had it. Love is blind, they say. I say, *au contraire*, young ladies are blind to the merits of the gentlemen, till love opens their eyes for them, and Cupid works quite as great miracles that way as ever Saint Valentine did; and that, I take it, is the reason why Saint Valentine is Cupid's father confessor, and his day the love-letter day of the calendar. As this is the first public dinner at which the ladies have been invited to sit down with the gentlemen, what day can be more appropriate for its celebration than Saint Valentine's? I hope every gentleman present has come prepared not only with his subscription, but with his Valentine, to slip into the hand of the fair lady at his side. If any of you have come unprepared with the necessary documents, instead of a *billet-doux* slip a *billet de banque* into her hand, to be added to her subscription. I defy you to find a fitter way of paying your addresses; for what better love-letters than £ s. d. when they go on an errand of mercy, like subscriptions to this charity?

But to-day, as we have been reminded, is Ash Wednesday, as well as Saint Valentine's Day. We actors and actresses should be the last persons to be startled by the coincidence. How many of our days, in the earlier stages of our career at least, are like this, consecrated at once to love-making in play and in public, and to fasting in sorry earnest at home. Our object to-day is not feasting but charity. If there be feeding, let it not be ours only, but that of the hungry mouths your benevolence will help to fill. There used to be Lenten oratorios. Let our Lenten oratorio be the chorus of grateful prayers that your kindness will call forth—the songs of thankfulness from the sick and the suffering—the widow and the orphan—from those who, but for you, might be abandoned—those who, but for your timely aid, might sink into the sad ranks of the forlorn and the despairing.

And now, Sir, in the name of the ladies, what am I to say to you that is at once as pretty as the faces about me, and as grateful as

my own heart? You have coupled my name with the ladies, but how are the ladies bound to couple your name with theirs, not here only but all the world over, as the creator of so many pure and beautiful pictures of womanhood—between whom, if not between you and our sex, should be established the title of "Our Mutual Friend."

Gentlemen, you have kindly drunk our healths. Let me, for self and sisters, say to you in the words of Rip Van Winkle: "Here's your good healths, and your families—and may they live long and prosper." (Loud and long-continued cheering.)

Mrs. Stirling's only important appearance during 1866, in a new rôle, was at the Princess's, on July 2, when she impersonated a French aristocrat, the Duchesse Jeanne d'Armenonville, in Watts Phillips' play, "The Huguenot Captain," the plot of which—though the story be set in sixteenth-century Paris, soon after the massacre of St. Bartholomew—is taken from a scene in Beaumont and Fletcher's "Custom of Country," where "Guiomar," a noble Portuguese lady, conceals a foreign gentleman, who, pursued by officers of justice, rushes into her house. She then discovers that he has killed her own son in a duel.

Dramatically "The Huguenot Captain" was not very effective, though interesting, as the work of an archæologist, as well as a playwright—one who knew, and loved, the old Paris of King Henry of Navarre, to whom the shining Seine, the Tour de Nesle, and the soaring bulk of Notre Dame, were full of memories, and of meaning, and who had seen the truth and beauty of those grotesque figures that have come down to us from the pen of the Lorrainer, Jacques Callot.

There follows a space of silence; and then, after a lapse of several years, says *The Times* [1]—not very accurately, for "The Huguenot Captain" had been running only seventeen months before—

Mrs. Stirling has returned to the Olympic, a theatre whose best days are closely associated with her name, to enact "Lady Diver Kidd," and gives a richly coloured picture of a woman in whom love of gain has risen to a glowing passion, and who is totally distinct from those charming widows of whom M. Scribe created so many specimens, until he ended by marrying one himself.

[1] December 6, 1867.

The play referred to was "From Grave to Gay," another of Ben Webster junior's adaptations, this time from the French of Scribe and Charles Potron, "Feu Lionel," the penultimate effort, I believe, of the playwright from whom so many Englishmen had borrowed. Its plot, turning upon the supposed suicide of one who was in fact alive, recalls, to that extent, Mr. Arnold Bennett's "Great Adventure." Mrs. Stirling won a fair share of what little sympathy was going, "rattled off quotations from the share list as fluently as if her whole life had been passed in a Stockbroker's Office," and was as gay, fresh, and welcome as ever. But the life and soul of the whole performance was the "Richard Wise" of Charles Mathews, "the man whom no difficulty can perplex, to whom every peril suggests a mode of escape, and who is constantly kept up to the mark by a keen sense of the ridiculous, which enables him to detect a droll side ever to the most serious calamity."

Early in the next year, February 1868, Mrs. Stirling, after playing the original "Mrs. Eddystone," in Stirling Coyne's domestic comedy, "The Woman of the World"—a good acting part in an otherwise undistinguished production—left the Olympic Theatre, upon whose boards she had won so many successes, and withdrew once more—this time for a period of some ten years—from active stage work.

CHAPTER XV

CONDITION OF THE ENGLISH THEATRE IN 1868

1868–78

Causes of Mrs. Stirling's withdrawal—Decadence of the Stage in 1868—Dearth of great players and playwrights—The coming people—Robertson and the Bancrofts harbingers of the revival—Pinero's tribute to them—Robertson as Dramatist—Compared with Tom Taylor—Beginnings of Realism in Europe—Naturalistic School in France—The Scandinavians and Strindberg—Ibsen's influence upon the revival—Pinero and H. Arthur Jones—Matthew Arnold on "The Silver King" as a transitional play—Mrs. Stirling teaches elocution—Her qualifications and limitations as Professor—"Bigger! my dear, bigger!"—The Royal Academy of Music Legend—Its genesis, and the facts—Mrs. Stirling reads "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Brighton—Repeats it at St. James's Hall, London—Benefit performances of "Mrs. Candour."

WHAT causes, exactly, may have brought about Mrs. Stirling's decision to withdraw from the stage, I am unable with absolute certainty to determine; but, in addition to the fact that the actress was now in her fifty-fifth year, and physically ailing, other potent reasons are not far to seek. A primary one, I doubt not, was the condition of the English stage at that time.

The picture is not, at first sight, a very hopeful one. Actors and actresses of first-rate ability there were very few; playwrights there were almost none, competent to furnish her with original parts really worthy of her calibre; nor was there, in those days, any manager, who, as Macready had done—and as Irving was to do—could take upon his shoulders the representation of our national dramatists, and make his theatre the home of a truly national art. Upon Samuel Phelps, if upon any man, the mantle of Macready fell; but Phelps, though an excellent and praiseworthy manager—who deserved perhaps more recognition than ever

he obtained—was never in charge of a West-End theatre—Sadler's Wells, which he governed from 1844 until November 6, 1852, being only a "minor." It was, nevertheless, the success of Phelps at Sadler's Wells, in national drama, that induced Charles Kean—his rival for nine years—to enter the lists at the Princess's; but Charles Kean's management was, from the critic's point of view, archæological and spectacular, rather than histrionic; so that neither of these actors can be said to have represented the national drama, as had their predecessor, Macready.

On the whole, the ever-recurring cry, "Our Drama is decadent," was more true of those days, I should judge, than of any others throughout the century. In the autumn following upon Mrs. Stirling's retirement, a *Saturday Reviewer* wrote:[1]

> We are justified in concluding that the drama has reached a lower stage in its decline than at any former period of its existence, and that, as a peculiar institution, it closely approximates to utter extinction. In the drama two arts co-operate—that of the writer and that of the actor—and, however the Nestors of former times lamented on the deterioration of the stage, they did not contemplate a school in which writing and acting alike should be without practical value. . . We are passing from drama, good or bad, into no drama at all.

These are strong words. How far were they justified? Let us look for a moment, rather more in detail, at the then condition of the British stage.

To take the players first, there was, as we have seen, no living individual upon whom the mantle of the great ones had fallen. Macready, long since retired,[2] had but some five years more of life before him. Charles Kean, who, though never a great actor, was at least a Shakespearean, and a conscientious producer, had died in the year of which I am writing—1868; and Henry Irving, already an experienced and rising player, for whom the highest honours are in store, had yet before him ten years of arduous work, ere the coming of that memorable day[3] when, as sole manager of the Lyceum, he was to appear in his first, and

[1] September 26, 1868.
[2] February 1851. He died April 27, 1873.
[3] Boxing Night, December 26, 1878.

in some respects greatest, Shakespearean impersonation, "Hamlet." [1]

Of the lighter actors, many had already passed their prime. Charles Mathews the younger, who had played "Frank Merriton" to Mrs. Stirling's "Mrs. Eddystone" in "A Woman of the World," and was destined to die in harness at seventy-five, had already sixty-five years to his credit. Robson, the greatest burlesque actor of his day, had passed prematurely, at forty-three years of age, in 1864; John Hare [2] and Kendal, still very young, had their feet only upon the lower rungs of the ladder of fame, while, of other men then known or to be known in their various spheres, Squire Bancroft was twenty-seven,[3] Forbes-Robertson [4]—who did not act until he was twenty-one—was fifteen, Beerbohm Tree [5] was the same age, and Frank Benson [6] was ten.

In the matter of actresses, as well as of actors, these were days of comparative dearth. The passing of Mrs. Glover, and the retirement of Mrs. Stirling, had robbed our theatre of its two greatest comédiennes. Helen Faucit—though her last appearance upon the stage was as late as 1879—had already accomplished the bulk of her life's work, and, personal successes notwithstanding, was often inclined to despond concerning its result. "She had seen so great a decline in the tone of the theatrical world"—wrote her husband—"and in the character of the plays which were most popular, that this fear [that she had lived in vain] at times took a strong hold of her."

Of the remaining notable actresses of the day, Ellen Tree [7] (Mrs. Charles Kean), though with twelve years of life yet before her, had withdrawn from active work, and, of the younger actresses, who were to attain foremost positions, Ellen Terry, though already well known, was not to achieve her first great Shakespearean triumph, as "Portia," until 1875. Two young comédiennes of quite rare ability were,

[1] Miss Ellen Terry, I think, puts "Wolsey" first; and many others, doubtless, think so with her.

[2] First appearance in London at Princess's, 1859, in John Oxenford's romantic drama, "Ivy Hale."

[3] Born May 14, 1841. [4] Born January 16, 1853.

[5] 1853–1917. [6] Born November 4, 1858. [7] 1808–1880.

however, nearing already the height of their fame—I mean, of course, Madge Robertson (Mrs. Kendal)—whose brother, T. W. Robertson, was now the leading dramatist of the day—and Marie Wilton (Lady Bancroft), who by producing, with her husband, Robertson's "Society," at the "Dust Hole," off Tottenham Court Road, on November 11, 1865, had proved her capacity as manageress as well as actress; and had given a stepping-stone to another actor of high ability, John Hare.

From a perusal of this long catalogue of facts, the plain truth clearly emerges, that, dark though the night had been, the dawn was already rising, had indeed risen; that its harbingers were Robertson and the Bancrofts; and its east The Prince of Wales's Theatre. Of those days of quickening, Mr. Pinero, as he then was, wrote to the Bancrofts, at the time of their retirement, in 1884:

> It is my opinion, expressed here as it is elsewhere, that the present advanced condition of the English stage—throwing as it does a clear and natural light upon the manners and life of the people, where a few years ago there was nothing but mouthing and tinsel—is due to the crusade begun by Mrs. Bancroft and yourself in your little Prince of Wales's Theatre. When the history of the stage and its progress is adequately and faithfully written, Mrs. Bancroft's name and your own must be recorded with honour and gratitude.

Pinero's was no lonely voice. Others, who possessed the vision—Moy Thomas among them—wrote in similar strain:

> The influence of your reign, both at the Prince of Wales and the Haymarket, will remain and grow. It is easy, as Tennyson says, to sow where you have the seed.

Yes, it is easy then; but let us turn again to the personnel.

If there were dearth, at that time, of great players, the same was not less true of playwrights. This may seem a hard saying, when one recalls that, only a year before, in April 1867, the triumphant success of "Caste," at the little Prince of Wales's, had set all London talking, and had almost marked a new era in stage history, by driving a nail into the coffins of the old stock companies, when, in due

course, a properly trained and equipped company took that dainty comedy into the provinces.

That these things happened is true: that one swallow makes no summer is true also. Yet Tom Robertson, though not in himself that summer, was assuredly its winged herald; and we who love the stage, and have basked in that full sunshine, when it came, owe gratitude to the man who brought so refreshing a human sentiment, and so delicate an art, to a theatre that sorely needed them all. That said, however, —and said earnestly—it must be admitted that, from the technical point of view, Robertson can hardly be regarded as an original writer much in advance of the dramatic fashion of his time.

Where he did show himself greatly in the quality of pioneer, was as a producer, and as a striver after truth both in acting and in stage setting, reforms in gratitude for which we can forgive and forget his triviality, his haste, and his occasional carelessness.[1]

Nevertheless, though touched by the newer truth, he was neither strong enough, nor big enough, to become its prophet. Not through one alone, but gradually, in many minds, the transforming ideas were to be begotten. Little by little the spirit of revolt, from the influences of Scribe and Sardou, was to permeate Western Europe. In their own France the naturalistic school—among whom Zola's is the greatest name—reacting against mechanical construction and characters devoid of truth, began to gather about Antoine and the Théâtre Libre. Ugly, coarse and formless the work of those men may often have been, but they did, at least, make plays that were real, according to their interpretation of that word.

Then, in Scandinavia, the true dramatic realists make themselves heard—most vehement among them Strindberg,[2] despairing, hopeless, terrible almost; yet gifted with a surprising naturalness of dialogue, and a wonderful capacity to create characters of compelling interest, who often suggest, or reveal, a certain elemental grandeur in the stubborn intensity of their revolt.

[1] Especially he reformed the then prevalent sin of over-acting.
[2] Strindberg became almost as prominent in Sweden as Ibsen in Norway.

But the man whose influence proved to be crucial was not that Nietzsche of the stage, Strindberg; it was that much wider, nobler, and loftier realist and idealist, Henrik Ibsen. Himself, for a time, under the spell of the French masters, he was soon to shake off their yoke, and fashion a drama that, for spiritual intensity, and absolute mastery of technique, has never been rivalled by any modern writer for the stage. Already the years 1866 and 1867 had seen the birth, in Scandinavia, of two of his early dramatic attempts—"Brand" and "Peer Gynt." In 1879 was to come "The Dolls' House,"[1] and ten years later, in June 1889, the same play, in Mr. Archer's translation, was to be first worthily presented to the London public.[2]

In this transformation of the English drama, Russian and German playwrights also had a share, but Ibsen, be it repeated, was the man who, bearing down all hostile criticism, principally determined the forms of the new school. Had there been no Ibsen, there would have been a different Shaw, and a modified Galsworthy. As for the more popular predecessors of those two—Pinero and Jones—Sir Arthur Pinero—who began his stage career in 1874, and produced his first play—"£200 a Year," at the Globe—in 1877—though perhaps as near at heart to the old order as to the new—certainly felt Ibsen's influence, and showed it plainly in such work as "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray"[3] and "The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith."[4]

Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, also a trimmer, on occasion, between old France and New Scandinavia, was seventeen years old when this chapter begins; but he was not to win his spurs before 1882, when "The Silver King"[5] was produced at the Princess's, on November 16.

Matthew Arnold, a very keen follower of the theatre, was present upon that occasion, and has left us impressions[6]

[1] "The Dolls' House" was unworthily presented in 1885—one reviewer heading his notice—"A silly play by silly people."

[2] "Rosmersholm," the height of his achievement, first appeared in 1886.

[3] First performed 1893. "Ghosts" and "Hedda Gabler" had been played in England two years before.

[4] These developments are ably sketched by Mr. Storm Jameson in his *Modern Drama in Europe*.

[5] Herman collaborated with Jones on the construction.

[6] *Letters of an Old Play-goer*.

which are interesting, as showing his consciousness of the new forces then at work within our drama. He reverts first to the old Princess's of Macready's day, when Mrs. Stirling also was working there, in 1845.

> It was another world from the old Princess's of my remembrance. The theatre itself was renewed and transformed . . . but the real revival was not in the paint and gilding, it was in the presence of the public . . . a representative public, furnished from all classes, and showing that English society at large had now taken to the theatre.

In "The Silver King" Arnold sees clearly a link between the transpontine melodrama of the old days and the literary drama of the new.

> The sensational incidents of the transpontine are there, but in general the diction and sentiments are natural, they have sobriety and propriety; they are literature. It is an excellent and hopeful sign to find playwrights capable of writing in this style, actors capable of rendering it, and a public capable of enjoying it.

Such, in brief, was the condition of the English stage, when Mrs. Stirling withdrew from it, so far as regular and sustained work is concerned. The old order, artificial and anti-national—in that it drew from the French most of the small inspiration it possessed—had passed, or was passing; and the new order, worthily heralded by Robertson and the Bancrofts, though already upon the horizon, was not yet risen. Its coming Mrs. Stirling lived to see; and in its stage triumphs she was to play awhile, a notable part, thus linking together, in her own personality, generations of art far distant one from another.

Meanwhile, she was to rest, in so far as her eager, industrious, and indomitable nature would allow her to do so; and, resting, her thought turned toward a branch of art —not highly enough esteemed to-day—in which, from her earliest Adelphi efforts, almost, she had been in the front rank—I mean the art of elocution. She was now to make further use of this talent, both as a teacher, and upon the platform.

When exactly she first began systematically to teach, I do not know—nor does the subject come strictly within

the scope of this book; but already the actress, it seems, was no novice at that work. Yet I cannot help thinking that many of the beginners whom Mrs. Stirling taught, must have had a rather trying time in her presence. My estimate of my grandmother's character leads me to suppose that she did not possess, at all times, patience enough to suffer incompetents gladly. Of gifted, eager, and promising pupils, I can imagine her an interested and excellent instructress; but of dense or stupid ones, rather the reverse. Mrs. Stirling may well, upon occasion, have proved too big for the task; and my view is borne out by the following passage from Frederick Wedmore's *Memories* in which her phrase—"Bigger, my dear, bigger!" that she reiterates, rings through one's mind, beside Mrs. Charles Kean's call to *her* pupils—Ellen Terry among them—"Plaster that BUT please against the gallery wall."[1] Thus Mr. Wedmore:

> In the reading—the delivery, that is, of Imaginative Literature, in prose or poetry—breadth seems to me of the first importance—general effect—the ensemble; . . . it must be broad first. . . . In this connection I am reminded of the phrase of Mrs. Stirling, that accomplished English actress, who, in her later life, gave lessons in what is called elocution—I am reminded of the word she was in the habit of launching from one end of the room to the other—from the end where she sat, to the end where there stood before her a young woman, a friend of mine, who was at that time her pupil. At the close of a passage Mrs. Stirling would condescend to no other comment than the utterance of this word, and the repetition of it—"Bigger, my dear, bigger!" The passage, begun again by the pupil, was now quickly interrupted, "Bigger!" And yet again, "Bigger, bigger, my dear!" Nothing else.
>
> My young friend thought Mrs. Stirling not meant quite, by Nature or by Art, to be a teacher of elocution. As an actress, authoritative; but as a professor, wanting in resource. Yet Mrs Stirling's first and most cryingly needed business was to attack and bear down the pettiness of the amateur.

My grandmother, in one of her later after-dinner speeches, refers to this branch of her work, and it was, I believe, for some years, the custom of Miss Ellen Terry, and of other actresses, to send pupils to her. The knowledge that she did private teaching of this kind caused the appearance, after

[1] *Miss Ellen Terry's Autobiography.*

her death, in several obituary notices—including that of *The Times*—of the statement that Mrs. Stirling was for several years a Professor of Elocution at the Royal Academy of Music. I adopted this belief, for a while, until, after writing to Mr. J. A. Creighton, the Secretary of that Institution, for information concerning dates, I was courteously informed that Mrs. Stirling had never been engaged in any capacity at the R.A.M. Further investigation revealed the fact that a Mrs. Stirling, following, or contemporaneously with, Mrs. Kendal, had been a Professor of Declamation at the Royal College of Music, which is not connected with the Academy. This lady, I discovered, was not Fanny Stirling nor any relation of hers, but Mrs. Arthur Stirling, herself a fine actress, as her husband was actor. To this confusion of names, then, is due the widespread belief, that Fanny Stirling taught at the Royal Academy of Music.

Deprived though the public now were of opportunity to see her upon the stage, the veteran had not withdrawn altogether into private life. She had been giving occasional public readings in the provinces; and on February 24, 1869, at the Grand Concert Hall, Brighton,[1]—her first appearance there—she read "A Midsummer Night's Dream," with Mendelssohn's incidental music, sung by way of accompaniment.

The chief performer stood at a desk on the right of the conductor, upon whose left were the two solo vocalists, Mesdemoiselles Liebhardt and Angèle. The comments of the *Brighton Herald*[2] are sufficiently picturesque to stand.

She was one amidst many, and the only agency she used was that of simple speech, coloured, at times, by a little action. When she entered all eyes were upon her, and when she spoke all ears were stretched to catch her lightest accents. She took her seat—her throne—*en reine*. For the time, she was the sole representative of the poet . . . the musicians and singers were at her command, doing loyal service indeed, but as an inferior power. . . . As our readers are doubtless aware, she is no longer young; but we doubt if any young woman could read the "Midsummer Night's Dream," even in the condensed form in which it was presented on Wednesday. Few young women would like to sacrifice their individuality to the

[1] The actress stayed for a short time at the Queen's Hotel.
[2] February 27, 1869.

exigencies of such characters as "Bottom," "Quince," etc. But Mrs. Stirling has arrived at that period of life when art is supreme in the mind. . . . Sitting in that immense room, it seemed to be impossible that a female voice could reach even those seated midway. But the first lines—those of "Theseus" to "Hippolyta"—disposed of that doubt. Uttered in a ringing tone, proper to a hero-king, they reached to the furthest extremity of the hall. Nor were the softer accents of "Hippolyta" less audible; nor the musical utterances of "Titania"; nor the dove-like complainings of "Helena," to say nothing of the sharper tones of "Puck," and the rougher voices of "Bully Bottom" and his co-mates of Athens.

The warm welcome given to this performance induced Mrs. Stirling to repeat it at St. James's Hall, London, April 23, 1869, the anniversary of Shakespeare's birthday. Defying, even before a West-End audience, the stage tradition that the faculties of actor and reciter are rarely allied, the actress proceeded to show her hearers that both may be blended in one individual. Her reception must have recalled vividly to her mind—though perhaps not without a pang—the days when, nearly a quarter of a century before,[1] she had often charmed London, as "Hermia," one of her loveliest Shakespearean impersonations.

Here in St. James's Hall, standing before the orchestra, with a full band, and a chorus of women in the background, she read the abridged text of the comedy, without attempting histrionic action of any kind. She seems to have adopted an almost declamatory style throughout, excepting only in "Bottom" the weaver, and in "Puck," whom she distinguished from the rest by a marked change in voice and manner. "Her delivery," says *The Times* critic, "was excellent; being equally notable for grace and perspicuity."

During the years immediately following, Mrs. Stirling played very seldom, the only part I have recorded being "Mrs. Candour"—generally held to be about the richest and ripest of her humorous impersonations—on the occasion of Webster's Farewell Benefit at Drury Lane, on March 2, 1874, and Buckstone's Benefit, at the same theatre, on March 4, 1878. About the mid-seventies, on a date unknown

[1] 1847, at the Princess's.

to me, she played "Lady Vavasour," to the "Lilian Vavasour" of Miss Ellen Terry, in "New Men and Old Acres"—the part of "Lilian Vavasour" being that in which Mrs. Kendal had gained her first triumph at the Haymarket, in October, 1867.

CHAPTER XVI

THE "NURSE" IN "ROMEO"

1879–82

Mrs. Stirling returns to the stage—"Lady Bountiful" in "The Beaux's Stratagem"—Farquhar as dramatist—A short run—Her last speech for the Dramatic Sick Fund, February 11, 1880—Accepts invitation from Henry Irving to play the "Nurse" in "Romeo and Juliet"—Irving's position at the head of our stage—Her difficulties at rehearsal—"Battle" with Miss Ellen Terry over "tradition"—Mrs. Stirling's complete success as the "Nurse"—Edward Russell and Miss Ellen Terry upon her performance—Percy Fitzgerald's criticism—The "undue prominence" of the part—Reasons for this prominence inherent in the play—Young lovers playing with an old nurse—Mrs. Stirling's peculiar qualifications for the part—Her record, leading up to it—Value of tradition in playing Shakespeare—Her "Nurse" built up upon tradition.

To withdraw from theatrical life is one thing: to remain long withdrawn from it is quite another, as many an actor and actress have discovered ere now. Sooner or later, most professionals find the lure of the lime-light irresistible, and, while strength remains, return where their hearts still are.

So it was with Mrs. Stirling, even though nearly half a century had passed since her first appearance upon the London boards. Whether it were the music of the name, a handsome salary, or a now almost traditional love of old comedy, that tempted her back, I know not: but back she came, to play "Lady Bountiful," in Miss Litton's production of "The Beaux's Stratagem," at the Imperial Theatre, near the Aquarium. Sentimental or loyal memories, perhaps, may in part also have influenced her decision, since "Archer," in that play, was one of Macready's favourite characters, though I do not know that she herself had ever taken part in the comedy before.

Be that as it may, she appeared on September 22, 1879,

and spoke, in addition to her part, a prologue written by Clement Scott, and beginning:

> A play by Farquhar, gentleman and wit;
> Here is the text in honest Saxon writ.

Of the four famous comic dramatists of the Restoration, Farquhar is the last in point of time, and the second in point of merit. He is more human, and better humoured, than the others, "making us laugh from pleasure oftener than from malice"—as Hazlitt puts it—genuinely gay, and never bitter.

But, though in a middle position between the rank indecencies of the Restoration, and the comparative purity of the eighteenth century, such a play as "The Beaux's Stratagem," Farquhar's last and best,[1] was still too coarse for late Victorian taste. The production was not a marked success. Some of the acting, according to *The Times*, was very good, and none of it was positively bad; but the performances were unequal, neither the spirit of the period, nor that of the dramatist, being generally caught. The run, consequently, was brief, and the event interesting chiefly as an opportunity to the public to welcome, and to the players to observe once again, a veteran actress, who, thirty-seven years before, in company with Laura Nisbett, had won the highest honours in Restoration comedy,[2] just as—though in a lesser degree—she won them again upon this occasion. The most successful impersonation of the night, says Dutton Cooke, "was Mrs. Stirling's 'Lady Bountiful'—strictly natural, while extremely comical."[3]

In Georgian comedy also she had been recognized, since the passing of Mrs. Glover, as the first among English actresses; and the opening of the Bancroft season at the Haymarket, on January 31, 1880, gave her an opportunity to appear once more as "Mrs. Malaprop,"[4] which part—to anticipate for a moment—she played again in December

[1] Written, in sickness, at close of 1706; first produced at Queen's Theatre, Haymarket, March 8, 1707. Farquhar died April 29 of that year.

[2] "Love for Love," November 19, 1842, during Macready's second season at Drury Lane. See pp. 74–5.

[3] *Nights at the Play*, ii. 209.

[4] For her and Mrs. Glover's rendering of "Mrs. Malaprop," see *ante*, pp. 119–20.

1882, under Thorne, at the Vaudeville—a performance that drew from Wilkie Collins the following tribute : [1]

Pray add my thanks to Mr. Thorne for his kindness, and my congratulations on his admirable performance of "Acres." He and Mrs. Stirling are comedians in the highest and best sense of the word.

Mr. Ben Greet tells me that, about this time, being "behind" at the Imperial Theatre, one night, when the old actress was playing "Mrs. Malaprop," he was highly amused, and a little bit disappointed, at seeing her applauding herself loudly, as she came off the stage with "Sir Anthony Absolute"—who was Mr. Farren. She insisted on dragging him back on to the stage, to take a call; but he "did not like it all, thought it most inartistic; and they almost came to friendly blows over it. It made a great impression upon me in my apprentice days." To-day Mr. Greet probably regards Mrs. Stirling's self-appreciation as nothing worse than the attempt of a veteran actress to administer to herself much needed encouragement.

Active though she still was, one by one her links with the past were being loosened. On Ash Wednesday, February 11, 1880, at Willis's Rooms, King Street, St. James's, she made the last of a long series of brilliant speeches, that, with only an occasional absence, due to sickness, she had delivered on behalf of the Dramatic and Musical Sick Fund, since 1862. Her words had given delight to many hearers, and had been the means of gathering many thousands of pounds for the charity. This closing effort is characterized by all the old mental alertness and allusiveness, all the wit, humour, word-play, pathos, and daring of the old days; nor can one say for how many years longer she might have gone on, had the Institution survived. The year 1880, however, seems to have been its last, perhaps for the reason, among others, that the Royal General Theatrical Fund was fast taking the premier place. Her last petition, made under the presidency of Henry Rance, Mayor of Cambridge, was thus:

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,—Though Christmas time be over, and the Pantomimes put to bed, with the help, I suppose,

[1] Letter to Mr. W. Archer, May 5, 1882.

of Clown's warming-pan and Pantaloon's hot poker, we are still in the region of transformation scenes. There, on one side of me, is the old Haymarket play-house, beloved by the oldest inhabitant, turned into a new Haymarket. Its old face re-made up, its inside turned inside out, its pit drawn off into the upper boxes, its new Management, with its old partner prosperity at the helm. And here, at my elbow, is the St. James's, a name that has long spelled loss, but now spells profit, with its "Hare and many friends," no fable, but a fact, laying the British public under contribution, like Falstaff, "in company with two knaves in Kendal green"; its venerable hall, lobby, and crush-room, which I remember musty and damp enough to suggest the appropriate rhyme of "mush-room," all in the freshest flower of high æsthetic decoration, furnished like a drawing-room, and hung like a picture gallery.

We used, in the old days, to be satisfied with tableaux on the stage, and glad to get them; two chairs and a deal table was the extent of our set in that pre-æsthetic period; now its management, calling a poet-laureate to its boards, and flying not "kites" but "falcons," and with "the Queen's shilling" enlisting all London in the St. James's Rifle Corps. Ah! if I could only be made young again, like the Haymarket, and the St. James's. Alas! it is not so easy to put a new face upon the player as upon the play-house. If I could change, no, I won't say change my bill for this evening, for that must still be, like the Bancroft's "Money," your money for this charity. Great is the power of speech, given the right "stump." Look at Mr. Gladstone; he draws, not the "stumpy," but, at least, equivalents in kind, new rigs-out, from silk hats to shepherd's-plaid unmentionables—the only cheques Scotland seems to have for him. By-the-bye, I don't find, somehow, that my eloquence helps to find me in frocks—I like that word, it has such a youthful ring about it—and hats. Oh! I should like to see myself in a beautiful, broad-brimmed, fluffy hat, that I might sing or say

I've been photographed like this,
I've been photographed like that,
I've been photographed so youthful
In a lovely fluffy hat.

But, never mind: though I don't work up to a wardrobe, or even have my shepherd's plaid pattern, like Mr. Gladstone, I can do without my own cheques if only I can work you out of yours. But, if I cannot succeed by fluency, à la Gladstone, perhaps I may be more successful, by condensation, à la Beaconsfield. Look what his Liebig's essence of policy, his concentrated champagne-jelly, which, we are told, he likes himself, and which he certainly administers to the public, his "peace with honour," his "scientific frontier," his "irrepressible chatter of irresponsible verbosity," have brought him! My stars and garters! Looking up to the sublime heights at which

he soars, one feels fairly "dizzy." If I could spin phrases like him, to what a figure might I not raise myself, or, what I value more, to-night's subscription list! And then to think that, besides the gold I should put into Mr. Auron's pocket—I beg his pardon, I mean the Fund's—I might bring some of the gold to my own brows, in the shape of a nice "people's tribute" of my own; they must be nice people to contribute to such a purpose. But alas! as Agamemnon wanted his Homer, I must wait for my Tracy Turnerelli. If he is in this room, and hears me, or if anybody here knows where he is to be found, and will kindly communicate with him, let him be assured that when he does offer me my wreath, it will be accepted. I will not send it to Madame Tussauds. But, in the meantime, I will take out the gold of my wreath in the shape of your contribution to this charity. When our new Dramatic School, in the leading strings of Professor Morley, is in full swing, let us hope that the poverty and suffering which this fund is founded to relieve will be less of a constant quantity. Of course, in that blessed time, when nobody shall make mistakes, and everybody shall know his or her vocation, and be taught to follow it, we may hope, even without the active exertions of the Church and Stage Guild, that the Theatre will be a region of gifted artists, all receiving large salaries, and all deserving them; all respectable, æsthetic, cultivated, and provident; in short, artists worthy of the Theatre of that blessed world of Cockayne, where the larks rain down ready-roasted, and crying "come eat me." But, while waiting for this consummation, devoutly to be wished, if not confidently anticipated, we have still our old ravel of suffering and poverty to knit up in the sleeves of the stage-wardrobe; still the grim old need to meet, the hungry mouths to fill; the wounds of a hard and bitter battle of life to staunch and bind. Our charity craves ever, with many open mouths. I crave, with my poor mouth, on its behalf to-night, as on this same Ash Wednesday night these twenty years and more. One doesn't like to look back, but I am afraid 'tis past a score; but after all there is little perhaps in their record that I may be gladder to look back on. I am, I believe with my old friend John Ryder, of about the oldest dramatic school going. I know that, in these days of School Boards, "dames" schools are apt to be very lightly valued; but at all events he and I may claim to have educated our fair proportion of the rising talent of the profession; and if it is our rising talent that makes the theatrical horizon so bright and promising, who but the old school is to thank for it? But there is one dramatic school even older than mine, and that is the school in which actors, and actresses, have learned the blessed lesson of charity and mutual kindness. It may be a hard school; but it has turned out apt pupils, who have learnt its lessons well, and zealously put them to the proof by practice. May the new Dramatic School, when it comes, be as justified of its pupils. One fortunate feature of the Theatre, in our times, is the countenance granted to it by our Royal Family. O! good gracious, a thought

strikes me—not a happy thought by any means! If that countenance, as it beams on us from the royal box, should ever have a foul anchor in blue on its august nose or noses! On this point of the royal nasal promontory, I pause; words cannot carry me further; I will only say, stifle your emotions, and take out your pocket-handkerchiefs, and while doing so take out your purses too. It would be unseemly, if not disloyal, in the case of a profession Royalty has so honoured with its favour, to allow its distresses to go unrelieved, if I may be allowed the expression, under the royal nose; so let me as "dashing white Sergeant" beat up my call for your contributions. How could I better finish the roll of my drum to-night, than with the royal tattoo?

* * * * *

After many years of retirement from public life, Mrs. Stirling, we may suppose, did not contemplate much more active stage-work, and would probably have declined all offers, had not the glamour of a Shakespearean régime at the Lyceum, and the personal petition of Henry Irving, overcome her irresolutions, and lured her back to the boards once more.

The occasion was the production of "Romeo and Juliet," the opportunity that of playing the "Nurse," a part which she had never before attempted. Mrs. Stirling consented to undertake the character, and it was well for her, as for the play-going public, that she did so. Already Henry Irving at the Lyceum, by common consent, and with public acclamation, had won the place to which, since Macready, no English actor had ever boldly aspired, or laid legitimate claim—that of the acknowledged Trustee and representative of the ancient traditions of our British stage, in its national and poetical aspects. In Miss Ellen Terry, moreover, Irving had found, for his leading lady, a worthy collaborator, an artist of rare and distinctive ability, and a personality of extraordinary charm. It was fitting that he should complete his company by the acquisition of an actress who had played "Cordelia" to Macready's "Lear," and "Desdemona" to his "Othello," and who now, in the maturity and ripeness of her age and art, was to put all she had learned—and it was much—of Shakespeare's wide humanity and woman's universal motherhood, into the part of Juliet's "Nurse."

New rôles and new lines, however, are less easily acquired

at sixty-nine than they may have been thirty years before; and the old lady found some difficulty, it seems, in adapting herself readily to more modern conditions. Harking back, as she did, in memory and affection, to the primitive methods in vogue before the stage carpenters and electricians wielded the dominion that is now theirs, she disliked the elaborate settings and cumbersome scenery of the Lyceum stage in the eighties.

That she found the rehearsals inadequate, Miss Terry has told us.[1] "'O these modern ways,' Mrs. Stirling used to say. 'We never have any rehearsals at all. How am I going to play the "Nurse"?'"

Then again, over traditional renderings, the old actress, who had been nourished almost upon tradition—warred occasionally with the younger school. Let Miss Terry, the "Juliet" of the play, continue the story.

> I had one battle with Mrs. Stirling over "tradition". It was in the scene[2] beginning
>
> The clock struck nine when I did send the nurse;
> In half an hour she promised to return!
>
> Tradition said that "Juliet" must go on coquetting and clicking over the "Nurse" to get the news of "Romeo" out of her. Tradition said that "Juliet" must give imitations of the "Nurse" on the line, "Where's your mother?" in order to get that cheap reward, "a safe laugh." I felt that it was wrong. I felt that "Juliet" was angry with the "Nurse." Each time she delayed in answering I lost my temper, with genuine passion. At "Where's your mother?" I spoke with indignation, rage and tears. We were a long time coaxing Mrs. Stirling to let the scene be played on these lines, but that is how it was played eventually.

Granting the fidelity of Miss Terry's rendering of the scene, and having admitted, without reserve, that when that lady has made up her mind to coax someone, that someone may as well surrender soon as late—unless for the purpose of drawing out a delight—I venture to uphold, in general, Mrs. Stirling's desire to stand resolutely for tradition, since upon ancient tradition the fabric of Shakespearean acting is assuredly built up. Upon that subject I

[1] *Ellen Terry's Memoirs*, pp. 210, *et seq.*
[2] Act II, Scene 5.

will say more later, and do but mention it now to complete the picture of her last important Shakespearean rôle, and the little difficulties she met with in preparing for it. All those difficulties — moving scenery, limited rehearsals, modern readings—were triumphantly overcome, and the old actress crowned her long career with a complete and unequivocal success. Of the praises bestowed upon her, none, I think, were more to the point than this, by Edward R. Russell, in an article on the dramatic revival, in *Macmillan's Magazine*: [1]

> This is the proper place to pay a brief tribute to the "Nurse" of Mrs. Stirling, which is a wonderful piece of elaborate and unctuous acting. Such perfection of mechanism is rarely seen. Every muscle, every expression, every syllable of the mellow voice is obedient to the will of the artist, and the result is that one of the most amusing, natural, and irresistible old women ever imagined lives before you, treads the stage, and asserts a phenomenal importance in the action of the play.

Miss Terry herself has written of the performance:

> She played it splendidly—indeed, she as the "Nurse" and old Tom Mead as the "Apothecary"—the two "old 'uns"—romped away with chief honours, had the play all to nothing. . . . She was the only "Nurse" that I have ever seen who did not play the part like a female pantaloon. She did not assume any great decrepitude. In the cords scene, where the "Nurse" tells "Juliet" of the death of "Paris," she did not play for comedy at all, but was very emotional. Her parrot scream when she found me dead was horribly real and effective. . . . When she played the "Nurse" at the Lyceum, her voice had become a little jangled and harsh, but her eye was still bright, and her art had not abated—not one little bit! nor had her charm. Her smile was the most fascinating, irresistible thing imaginable.

With the last sentence of that vivid sketch all will concur who, though not having seen the original, may know the familiar portrait of Mrs. Stirling as the "Nurse," with Miss Mary Anderson as "Juliet." [2] Her humour, in that picture, has about it a rich, generous, satisfying quality, like a comedy of Shakespeare, the flavour of an old vintage port, or a chapter of George Meredith.

Miss Terry's frank admission that Mrs. Stirling and Tom

[1] Vol. xlvi, 1882.

[2] See Frontispiece.

Mead "had the play all to nothing" is borne out by the other critics, so far as the "Nurse" is concerned. The *Era*[1] gives first place among the ladies to Mrs. Stirling; and Percy Fitzgerald, in his book upon Henry Irving at the Lyceum,[2] and telling the same tale of the "Nurse's" pre-eminence, raises an interesting point.

> Terriss was the "Mercutio," which he gave with his favourite blunt impetuosity. But one of the most perfectly played characters was Mrs. Stirling's "Nurse." This accomplished woman represented all the best traditions—high training, admirable elocution, with the art of giving due weight and breadth to every utterance. And yet here was a curious phenomenon. The very excellence of the delineation disturbed the balance of the play. The "Nurse" became almost as important as the leading performers, but not from any fault of the actress. She but followed the due course. . . . But there should be subordination. . . . With an actress of Mrs. Stirling's powers and rank the manager, no doubt, felt too much delicacy to interfere; nor perhaps would the audience have placidly accepted any effacing of her part. But as it was, the figure of this humble retainer became unduly prominent.

The problem is one that, out of the very nature of the play, must sometimes arise in productions of "Romeo and Juliet." We saw an example of it not long ago, at the Lyric, when, curiously enough, Miss Ellen Terry herself, as the "Nurse," by reason of those same gifts—her elocution, her temperamental qualities, and her matured stage technique—was able, in her turn, to do as had been done long since unto her, and to have most of the other players, excepting only "Mercutio,"[3] "all to nothing."

The reasons for such happenings are to be found, of course, in the difficulties that attend the playing of the title parts in "Romeo and Juliet"—difficulties so great that not one actor nor actress in a hundred can completely overcome them. The young "Juliet" who may reveal the beauties of that exquisitely lyrical opening, cannot always sustain the swiftly moving emotions of the southern maid, nor rise to the tragic intensity of the death-visions and the potioned cup. By the time that she is mature enough

[1] March 11, 1882.
[2] *Henry Irving: Twenty Years at the Lyceum.* 1893.
[3] Mr. Leo Quartermaine.

BEN WEBSTER.

[*Photo: London Stereoscopic Company.*

MRS. STIRLING AS THE NURSE IN "ROMEO AND JULIET."

[*Photo: Downey & Co.*

for the one, she is already too old to look or to feel the other. There is the eternal tragedy of "Juliet," of the actress's art in general we might almost say. And with "Romeo" the difficulty is similar: he also must be both boy and man.

Then, beside these two young lovers—at the very moment when their youthful incompleteness and technical inefficiencies are perhaps being revealed to the audience—comes this benignantly conceived personality of the "Nurse," into whom Shakespeare has wrought his tenderest love, his ripest humour, his deepest sense of woman's sublime and universal motherhood;—a character to be played, necessarily, by a well-matured actress, in whom years, no longer a fault, have become an essential virtue. What wonder, then, that, too often, the "Nurse" usurps more than a mere retainer's share of the audience's sympathy and attention, since in all the beautiful art of the stage there is nothing more delightfully restful and pleasing, to an understanding play-goer, than to see a broadly maternal part played by an actress, with all the perfect ease and unerring certainty that only decades of experience can give?

The foregoing facts apply, in principle, to every nurse in stage history; but Mrs. Stirling's case, nevertheless, was quite exceptional, when it is remembered that she was playing to a "Romeo" and "Juliet" who were the leading actor and actress of their day, appearing in one of the notable revivals of the century. Granted that the lovers of Verona were not parts peculiarly suited to the genius of Henry Irving, or of Miss Ellen Terry, the qualifications of this "Nurse" were still superlative.

Naturally a woman of keen intelligence, and of strong understanding, endowed with an intense and ardent nature, an abounding sense of humour, and a deep love of art, she brought also inevitably to the part a range of experience that almost no actress, of any time, could match. For over forty years she had maintained her position as one of England's leading performers; and for thirty years her supremacy had been unchallenged, as the first comédienne of her day. Farce, comedy, drama, tragedy—all had come alike to her. She had played many times "Cordelia," "Desdemona," "Rosalind," "Portia," and the other

Shakespearean heroines. In "Adrienne Lecouvreur," and in "Tisbe," she had touched the hem of Rachel's garment; she had transformed bad plays into good ones, and artificial rôles innumerable into almost as many living creations. And now, at last, though with "voice a little jangled," but with her art not one wit abated, and all her energies yet intact—aged, but not old—there had come to her the opportunity to personate this ancient retainer, into whom Shakespeare had breathed something of his broadest, sweetest, and tenderest sympathies about the heart-compelling motherhood of woman. What more natural than that Mrs. Stirling should see here a last worthy occasion; should fasten upon it, and—even to undue prominence—make that character the one in which she should carry down to posterity her share in our loftiest dramatic tradition.

Tradition, as Sir Frank Benson well reminded me recently, is of vital importance in the playing of Shakespeare.[1] It is the essential thought of his time, the torch of dramatic learning and authority handed down from stage to stage, from actor to actor, linking and unifying, across the centuries, the great arts of the dramatist and his interpreters. Some players—and Mrs. Stirling was one of these—can handle such tradition marvellously well, can let it come to them, penetrate them, permeate them, and shine through their personalities, as Garrick did, and after him some of those mellow actors of the old school, such as Howe—to name but one. Others have harder work with this living light from the past—as Kemble had, and Henry Irving. They must go out to meet it, must parley with it—not always easily—before they can open to it their hearts, and warm themselves, at last, in its beams.

Upon that great Shakespearean tradition Mrs. Stirling's "Nurse" was built up. She moulded it into her own personality, carrying it on, adapting and enlarging it, into the perfect "Nurse" that will go down to posterity as the model. To few only is it given to do such things. Who would play Shakespeare worthily must have something of his greatness, fortified by natural gift, and perfected by

[1] Sir Frank Benson made his first professional appearance as "Paris" in this production, for which see his preface to this book.

long initiation. He, or she, must bring to such work love and sympathy past telling, and high nobility of soul: they must make, at the same time, all needful sacrifice, before they can become the chosen vessel, and the child of the larger life, understanding the divinity of man, understanding also the Deity of God. Only thus, and only then, in the measure of that understanding, will he, or will she, succeed.

CHAPTER XVII

LAST APPEARANCES, RETIREMENT AND DEATH

1883–95

Mrs. Stirling plays "The Marquise," in the Bancrofts' revival of "Caste" at the Haymarket—A new rendering of the part—Her struggle against physical disabilities—"Lady Caryll" in Pinero's "Lords and Commons"—Her last original part—The "Nurse" again, with Miss Mary Anderson—Miss Anderson's recollections of her, and Mr. Ben Greet's—Charity matinées—Retirement of the Bancrofts—Is persuaded to play "Martha" in Henry Irving's production of "Faust," at the Lyceum—A fine scene with "Mephistopheles"—Failure of her sight—Miss Ellen Terry's story of Mrs. Stirling as "Martha"—Plays for the last time on July 31, 1886—Irving's speech thereon—Her final withdrawal—Spiritual troubles—Intimate correspondence with Miss Anderson—Marriage with Sir Charles Gregory—Last days, and death, December 28, 1895.

Mrs. Stirling's success as the "Nurse" naturally brought other actor managers to realize that the veteran actress was not yet a spent force. The Bancrofts, at the Haymarket, were contemplating a revival of "Caste," that most tender and human of the Robertson comedies, first produced on April 6, 1867. The revival which commenced on January 21, 1883, was quite as successful as productions under that management usually were,—and that is saying much—Mrs. Bancroft herself, as "Polly," being once more the life of the piece, and David James, as "Eccles," giving one of the most convincing studies of drunkenness recorded in the history of the stage.

But, in the Bancrofts' own words, these performances of "Caste" were chiefly memorable to them

by the sincere pleasure we had in persuading that perfect mistress of her art, Mrs. Stirling, to play the "Marquise de St. Maur," which proved of infinite value, and whose influence at the rehearsals—owing to the unwearying pains she put into them—was also of good effect.[1]

[1] *The Bancroft Memoirs*, p. 250.

Some critics had predicted failure for her. Mrs. Stirling, they thought, could never subordinate her grand style, and old English traditions, to the minutiæ of Robertsonian comedy. They were wrong. The old lady vindicated completely her selection, and deserved, as well as earned, her considerable salary—seven times larger than that paid to the original representative of the "Marquise." Her broad humanity enabled her to put enough of the mother into the high-born woman, just as she had put it into the "Nurse" —and so to tone down towards acceptance the aristocratic snobbishness of the consequential "Marquise," whose exit most audiences receive with undisguised pleasure, when "Esther Eccles" opens the door. One critic[1] opined that the part of the "Marquise de St. Maur" had never been thoroughly understood until Mrs. Stirling took it up; and Squire Bancroft himself wrote:[2]

We were fortunate enough to persuade that great actress, Mrs. Stirling, to appear as the "Marquise." She played the part as it had never been acted; the tones of her grand voice still linger in the memory, as she said to her son: "I may never see you again. I am old, you are going into the battle."

Back again in the mêlée, she was still undaunted, though the effort taxed even her resolute determination, as this further extract from the *Bancroft Memoirs* makes clear:

I have known that grand old actress, Mrs. Stirling, when suffering from a severe attack of bronchitis, to go to the theatre in all weathers, and at great risk, more especially at her age, when she ought to have been in bed. I have seen her arrive scarcely able to breathe, but insisting on going through her duties. This has often been an anxiety, for while admiring her courage, I have feared bad results from it. Mrs. Stirling's sight being impaired, she always dreaded stairs, and, unfortunately for her, in the hall of Caryll Court there was a long gallery and then a tall flight of steps leading from it to the stage, while behind the scenes there was another flight, to reach this gallery. Luckily, she did not enter alone, but had the kindly help of Miss Eleanor Calhoun, who played her daughter in the piece. When Mrs. Stirling was ill, these stairs would naturally be a double anxiety, but she would listen to no change of entrance in the scene which might affect the arrangement of the play, and I often felt anxious about her.

One would imagine, to see her slowly and cautiously ascend the

[1] *Daily Telegraph*, January 22, 1883. [2] *The Bancrofts*, p. 119.

flight of steps, stopping every now and then to murmur "O! these stairs!" that she would scarcely be able to get through her part; but although she has stood gasping for breath, and terribly ailing, the moment her cue came to go on the stage she seemed to become twenty years younger; vigour returned to her limbs, and she walked with such a firm and stately gait that the change was extraordinary. Her grand voice alone was worth a good walk to listen to, and her acting of the part was as no one else *could* act it.

"Never," commented Sir Squire Bancroft, "will a true artist break faith with the public, while able to stand or speak."

On November 24, 1883, despite the handicap of increasing physical disabilities, the actress undertook what proved to be her last original part, "Lady Caryll," in Pinero's comedy, "Lords and Commons"—a performance interesting chiefly because it links up her stage career with a great and still active dramatist, and with a living generation of players. The Bancrofts, Mrs. Bernard Beere, Johnston Forbes-Robertson were all in the cast of a play, which, though it ran for some eighty nights, was generally reckoned a failure. Sir Arthur Pinero had not then come fully into his own as a playwright: his rendering of that popular theme, "New Men and Old Acres," was technically immature, and rather too cynical, perhaps, to win much popular favour. *The Times* was severe upon it:

Mr. Pinero has yet to learn, it would seem, one of the elementary principles of his art, which is that the sympathies of the house must never be trifled with, that a dramatist—mystify his characters as he may—must never mystify his audience.

As for Mrs. Stirling, she, in the rôle of an aristocratic dowager, struggled along as best she might, generally able, by her indomitable determination, to conceal from observers in front the fact that the practice of her art was now an effort. It was concerning her appearance in this play that the Bancrofts wrote:

It would be very interesting to an audience to be given, now and then, a peep behind the scenes, or in the Green Room; they would often see what good servants to the public are the actors; how often, when suffering acute pain, they have gone through their work so

bravely that the audience has not detected even a look of it. The public owe more to the actor than they will perhaps be prepared to admit.

Not long after the termination of the run of "Lords and Commons," Mrs. Stirling presented to Mrs. Pinero the stick she had used as the "Nurse" in Irving's production of "Romeo" at the Lyceum, and also in Mr. Pinero's own play. Upon it she had inscribed a quotation from her own part in "Lords and Commons"—"I am of the old fashion." Lady Pinero kept this souvenir until the outbreak of the Great War, when, by her desire, it was sold, at the first auction held by Christie's, in aid of the Red Cross Fund.

After her success at the Lyceum, in 1882, any London revival of "Romeo and Juliet" was bound to bring the veteran actress again into request, if she were still willing, and able, to undertake the "Nurse." When, therefore, in November, 1884, at the same theatre, Miss Mary Anderson put the play on, with herself and William Terriss in the title parts, Mrs. Stirling was naturally asked again to take up once more her old part, when her first husband, Edward Stirling,[1] was cast for "Friar Lawrence"; this being, no doubt, the last production in which the couple played together. Mrs. Stirling repeated her success, and her acting received the usual chorus of press approval, though the criticisms made, in some quarters, two years before were again heard —against the dominance that the old lady put into the part.

Mrs. Stirling's "Nurse" [wrote the *Athenæum*] is too distinguished. That a woman occupying her position in a household such as that of the Capulets, might be a person of consideration, may be granted; Shakespeare, however, takes care to show that she is not.

The chief interest of the production, from our point of view, lies in the fact that it remains well within the memory of the younger actors and actresses, who, through playing in it, became Mrs. Stirling's close friends. I refer especially to Miss Mary Anderson herself, and to Mr. Ben Greet.

The last named had been engaged by Miss Anderson as the "Apothecary." He was—he tells me—the twelfth

[1] Stirling lived nearly ten years longer, dying August 14, 1894.

"Apothecary": and he overheard Miss Anderson say that, good or bad, he must be kept, as she could not be bothered with a thirteenth! Weariness, or caution? Mr. Greet did not know; but he *was* kept; and he made friends with the old "Nurse."

We had long rehearsals; and the dear old lady used to sit in the stalls, or sometimes in the dress-circle, at the Lyceum, and, while taking keen interest in the proceedings, would pass the quaintest remarks upon the performers, and the general methods adopted. Between her racy comments, and comparisons between the old order and the new, she would hug her knees, crippled by rheumatism—and, swaying to and fro upon her seat, would murmur: "O! my knees, my knees!"

One day, during these rehearsals, she confided to me that she still loved acting, but was sick and tired of the dressing-up and undressing. "If only someone would take me up, and drop me down, ready dressed, on the stage! But for myself, I think it is time I gave it up."

When eventually the play was produced, I used to fetch her nearly every night from her dressing-room—Miss Mary Anderson would do it sometimes—and take her across to her entrance. She needed my help most when the "black-outs" came to change the scenes. This was an American innovation, to black out all lights, so that the scenes could be changed in the pitch dark, without having the drop curtain down. They could do it over there, where they had electric light in theatres years before we did here. Poor dear! she was rather blind in those days, and very nervous; and just could not stand the tremendous shiftings of the scenes. She used to think the whole bag-of-tricks was tumbling on her, and would say: "O! those toppling cathedrals; they always make me feel as though I were in an earthquake!"

But the member of the company who came most closely into the last years of Mrs. Stirling's life, both as fellow-actress and friend, was Miss Mary Anderson herself. One glance at the well-known photograph [1] of them together, as "Juliet" and her "Nurse"—the best photograph of Mrs. Stirling ever taken, and one of the loveliest of Miss Anderson also—suggests a mutual affection that was not put off with the parts.

At her beautiful house at Broadway, Mme. de Navarro, —as she now is—kindly gave me some very interesting recollections of the old lady and her art.

[1] By Messrs. Downey.

When Mrs. Stirling walked on to the stage she ceased to be Mrs. Stirling, but became somebody else—in "Romeo and Juliet" the old Italian retainer, Shakespeare's "Nurse." No one has been quite the same, quite as real, before or since—not even Miss Ellen Terry, when she played with Doris Keane.

Mrs. Stirling's scene with "Romeo," where she pretends to refuse the bribe,[1] was magnificent. "No, truly sir, not a penny!" standing with her hands behind her back. Then, when she had taken the money, she would cross the stage, chinking the coins as she went, with her hands under her chin, until "Peter" was within reach of her stick. Then it was thwack! thwack! thwack:—chink, chink, chink—quite legitimate business, that every night would set the house in a roar.[2]

In the garden-scene also Mrs. Stirling was wonderful. While exasperating "Juliet" almost to distraction—by withholding the longed-for news of "Romeo"—she would convey to the audience, all the time, the deep affection that underlay her love of fun and mischief. This quality of living impersonation, it was, that made her so delightful to work with. Remembering that great actress, there seems to me to be so little of such spirit upon the modern stage; but rather a tendency, when your scene is done, to go off, talk about motor-cars, and take little more interest in the remainder of the play.

She was a darling! and very charming in all her ways. Between the morning and evening performances she used to love to sit cosily with me in my dressing-room; and have something to eat—oysters, I remember, were a favourite dish of hers—and then she liked to sit by the fire, and give up all activity, and just play at being *very old*. I used to lecture her for giving in so; and when she repeated that she was "finished with, and done for," I would say: "No, indeed, you are not: you must cheer up, and not give way. Remember Mrs. Keeley: she is older than you are, but doesn't give up so."[3]

One day, during the run at the Lyceum, when I was lunching with W. E. Gladstone—the G.O.M.—he said to me: "You will be seeing Fanny Stirling to-night; please tell her from me—she was my first love.[4] No harm to tell her so now!"

Mme. de Navarro's further, and beautiful, relations with her old friend I must leave until I have completed the story of Mrs. Stirling's stage career.

[1] Act II, Scene 4.

[2] Miss Anderson played this for me with great zest—the "Juliet" of 1884 became the "Nurse" in 1921.

[3] Mrs. Keeley, born in 1805, was then in her eightieth year. She died in 1899.

[4] The year referred to was probably 1838, or thereabouts. See Chapter III.

Concerning 1885, there is little of interest to relate, but on March 25, willing and eager as ever in the cause of charity, Mrs. Stirling appeared with Mrs. Keeley in a rhymed epilogue by Clement Scott, at a matinée on behalf of the National Aid Society for the sick and wounded in Egypt and the Soudan. On July 20 of the same year, at the Haymarket, with many other professionals, including Irving and Toole, she took part in Mr. and Mrs. Bancroft's farewell performance, upon their retirement. Her task was to portray, for the last time, one of her favourite characters in the old days—"Lady Franklin," in the first act of Bulwer Lytton's "Money." At Creswick's Benefit, October 29, she was once more on the stage with Mrs. Keeley, and recited "Our Whaler Fleet." Occasionally she would be persuaded to appear at some charity matinée, in one of her old parts, as, for example, "Mrs. Steinhold," in "Still Waters Run Deep," at the Naval College, Greenwich, when Carlotta Addison played "Mrs. Mildmay." Mr. Ben Greet, who was present, remembers Mrs. Stirling's performance, as being most remarkable.

Then, in December, came Henry Irving's production of Goethe's "Faust," as adapted by Wills. The actor-manager, in search of a "Martha," offered the part to Mrs. Stirling. The old lady, dubious of her physical strength, hesitated. She went to Mr. Bancroft, who, with Mrs. Bancroft, was then among her closest friends. He thought that she might well attempt it; she consented, therefore, and took up what proved to be her last part.

All things considered, the actress succeeded remarkably well, in a production that, despite some unfavourable comment, received much approval and support. The *Daily Telegraph*, always faithful to an established favourite, told us that "to atone for all the failure in fancy and fervour" —the critic, Clement Scott I suppose, had complained of lack of melody in the orchestral music—

> we had the scene between "Martha" and "Mephistopheles" inimitably played by Mrs. Stirling and Mr. Irving. It was not the "Martha" of our imagination, but what actress of our time could do so much with so little? Each line on each side was a point, and the best point made by Charles Kean,

Where will she go by and by,
I wonder? I won't have her,

was doubly emphasized by Mr. Irving. The whole house rose at it.[1]

Other critics complained that, as in the "Nurse," Mrs. Stirling usurped, upon the stage, greater prominence than the author had intended for her; while, concerning her age, *The Times* was almost brutally frank. "Mrs. Stirling, as "Martha," though she has done her best, is too old for the part, which in opera is appropriately played by robust contraltos of forty-five"; and, indeed, the truth of the matter is, that, clever as the old lady might be at concealing the fact, her sight, which had been failing her since "Romeo and Juliet," had now almost completely gone.

Miss Ellen Terry herself, I well remember, over a cup of tea, in her house at Chelsea, told me the story, almost in these words:

One night, at the beginning of the run—it was just before "Henry's" entrance—I was sitting here on the stage, and your grandmother there. Then came the knock at the door—rat-a-tat! That was "Mephistopheles." Your grandmother started at the noise, dropped her work, rose, and went to open the door for him. Meanwhile, I crossed the stage, and took up the work, which I thought might be in the way. "Martha," by this time, was ushering "Henry" in. She had been able to see pretty well, at his entrance, because a red light was thrown upon him; but as soon as she was well on the stage again, she lost her way, and nearly fell into the orchestra. When the play was over, the old lady came to me, and said:

"My dear, why did you pick up my work?"

"Because I thought it would be in your way!"

"It wasn't in my way; I dropped it there on purpose. When I come from the door I can see that white patch, and when I get to the patch I can see my seat; but I can't find my way to my seat without first getting to my work."

The dropping of the work had followed so naturally upon the start, at hearing "Mephistopheles'" knock, as to make even the "Marguerite" think the incident involuntary. When I heard the story from the original "Marguerite," that lady transformed herself into "Martha," dropped her handkerchief upon the floor, to represent the work, and

[1] *Daily Telegraph*, December 21, 1885.

acted the scene for me. It is a recollection that will long remain.

Mrs. Stirling continued to play "Martha" until the close of the summer season at the Lyceum, on Saturday, July 31, 1886. When the curtain had fallen that evening, Henry Irving, in response to a call, came forward, still dressed as "Mephistopheles," and expressed his thanks, and those of Miss Terry, for the unstinted kindness of their public. He then added:

> I regret to tell you that we are about to lose the help of one of the most distinguished actresses of the British stage—Mrs. Stirling. Not that this is her leave-taking. I hope that she will be persuaded to appear once more; but she feels the necessity of rest and retirement. Mrs. Stirling has indeed done the stage good service, having been constantly before the London public for fifty-seven years.[1] I am sure that all true lovers of the drama hope that her future surroundings may be serene and bright. I do with all my heart.

Irving then led Mrs. Stirling before the curtain to make her bow, after which ceremony, Miss Ellen Terry and other ladies of the company "waited upon her," and presented her with a basket of flowers. Thus quietly, and characteristically, without formal leave-taking, this long stage career came to an end. When the run of "Faust" was resumed, the part of "Martha" was taken by Mrs. Chippendale.

From that time forward the veteran actress lived in complete retirement at her London home, 3, Duchess Street, Portland Place. Her old age, during these years, was somewhat lonely and unhappy, and found its chief solace, I think, in the close friendship of Miss Mary Anderson, who corresponded with her much, and visited her frequently. "She treats me absolutely as a child, but would come to me again and again for help. When I visited her, she would say: 'Sit here, Mary, and hold my hand'; and then she would pour out all her troubles."

These were in part religious. The longing for spiritual peace was strong within her at this time; and, having been educated, when a girl, as a Roman Catholic, she naturally found herself turning for help to the devoted friend who was also of the same faith. In Miss Anderson's own words:

[1] If this be correct, it fixes her London début at the year 1829.

"I, being a woman, and her close friend, knew better perhaps than any priest exactly where she was, and how to deal with her." Conversation on spiritual matters was the subject she preferred to any other during these years. Three characteristic letters, written to Miss Anderson about this time, will be read with interest.

Mrs. Stirling to Miss Mary Anderson (Mme. de Navarro).

3, Duchess Street,
Portland Place, W.
(no date) *Friday.*

My Dearest Mary,

You will, from not hearing earlier this morning, have guessed that I have not been able to see my way to leaving home just now. I will not bother you with all the reasons that make it undesirable for me to do so; they would all seem so trifling in comparison with the comfort and peace that might perhaps ensue. I live a life of great loneliness and quiet, sometimes not hearing a voice all day, but my own, and I ought, I feel, to be able to commune with myself and try to help myself during this quiet—and I must be content for the present to try and do so. While writing this you are perhaps saying your promised little prayer for me. May God hear you on my behalf! I shall never forget your goodness in coming to me to tell of the possibility of gaining peace and comfort. I envy you, dear, the happiness you have been blessed with, and cannot tell you how happy it made me to see your happiness. I prize so much the little book you gave me: it will never leave me, and I shall look into it every day, reminding me of your love and thought for me. God will bless you for it, dear. I hope you will not leave England without letting me see you again. It is selfish to ask this, but to see you and to know you to be happy is next door to being happy myself!

F. S.

3, Duchess Street,
Portland Place, W.
29*th* (*July*, 1886).

Oh! my dearest Mary, I *am* so angry with you! for months not a line! I did not know whether you were in England or where, and tho' thinking of you all day yesterday did not know where to send to let you know how much I was thinking of you; but now, dear, you must take the will for the deed, and imagine all the love and blessings I wished to send. I have been very unwell all this time, but I thank God, who has heard all the prayers of my sister, and of those better able to pray for me than I for myself, I am a little better and hoping to leave town next week for a few days in search of air.

5, Duchess Street,
Portland Place
W. 29th

Oh! my dearest Mary,
I am so angry with
you! for months not
a line! I did not
know whether you were
in England or
where, tho' thinking
of you all day yesterday
did not know where
to send to let you
know how much I was

in Sept^r, it will
be quite something
to look forward to.
London is clearing
fast after all that
dreadful Jubilee
business. I hope you
are having a really
good time of rest
& peace. Good bye
my Lady bird.
God bless you for thinking
of Mama Stirling.

I shall only be away about ten days, and then, if I am equal to it, after a week or two, go away again for a short time. I have not been out of London for months, so you must pray that I may come back safely! I hope I may live to see you in September, it will be quite something to look forward to. London is clearing fast after all that dreadful jubilee business.[1] I hope you are having a real good time of rest and peace. Good-bye, my "lady bird,"[2] and God bless you for thinking of "Nurse" Stirling.

3, Duchess Street,
Portland Place, W.
(no date) *Thursday.*

My Dearest Mary,

I am so glad to get your letter. I concluded you had left Malvern, so did not write. I hope you have had a "good time" of it! I think I told you Father Gavin was called away to a convent at Brighton; he went to see my sister at our Lady's Priory—he had been to see me nearly every day up to that time, and immediately on his return, so that I have not seen him for some little time, he being still away, but, during his first absence I went to Nazareth House [3] to talk with Sister Mary (the General Superioress) who much wished me to know "Father Bede," who was there giving them a retreat, and whom she had known for years. I had a long talk with him, and the result was a confession made there at once—I felt if it was not done then, at the moment, I might never be able to nerve myself again. I know you will rejoice at this, dear, together with my sister and all the good sisters at Nazareth House, all of whom have been praying for me incessantly. I cannot stop to tell you half, and I leave town on Saturday for about three weeks. Letters sent here will be forwarded. I am so sorry to think I shall miss seeing you just yet. God bless you, dear.

F. S.

The sister referred to in the last letter was Agnes, who for many years had been Lady Superior at a convent on the continent—at Bruges, I think—and was now returned to England. It was typical of Mrs. Stirling's lonely isolation from her family connexions, that when these two met, after some twenty-five years of separation, they did not, at first, recognize one another. At that very time, too, the old actress would occasionally pass, in Portland Place, a young woman of distinguished appearance. The two ladies ex-

[1] Queen Victoria, 1886.
[2] "Romeo and Juliet," Act I, Scene 3. "Nurse," calling "Juliet": "What, lamb! what, lady-bird!"
[3] The Convent at Hammersmith.

changed glances; but only the younger knew—what she was not free to tell—that Mrs. Stirling was looking upon her own granddaughter.

Mrs. Stirling still did a little teaching. On October 26, 1892, at the time when Irving was about to revive "Lear" at the Lyceum, Miss Ellen Terry wrote in her diary:

> A fine day. To call on the young Duchess of S. What a sweet and beautiful young girl she is! I said I would write and ask Mrs. Stirling to give her lessons, but feared she could not, as she was ill.

In November came this answer, from the old "Cordelia" to the young one:

> I am too ill and weak to see anyone in the way of lessons. I am just alive—in pain and distress always, but always anxious for news from the Lyceum. "Lear" will be a great success, I am sure. I was "Cordelia" with Macready.

On August 14, 1894, her first husband, Edward Stirling, died, and a few months later, in the same year, at the age of eighty-one, the widow married an old friend with whom she had long been very intimate, and who, for years past, had been a familiar figure in the stalls, whenever Mrs. Stirling was performing. This was Sir Charles Gregory,[1] past-president of the Society of Civil Engineers—in Miss Ellen Terry's phrase,

> a very courtly old gentleman, who honoured her, and was most devoted to her. They used to walk up Portland Place together every morning, both looking very distinguished, and a little bent. Sir George and Lady Lewis, from a neighbouring window, would look out, every morning, for "the old couple."

Serene and peaceful were those last months of her life, passed in the companionship of her husband, and further cheered by occasional visits from some of her stage friends. Miss Mary Anderson when in England was the most frequent visitor of them all, and perhaps the best beloved. Mrs. Kendal went once, and was received "as by a queen."

Sir Squire Bancroft also has told me how, on Sunday evenings, after service, he used to stroll up to her house,

[1] Sir Charles Hutton Gregory, K.C.M.G., born October 14, 1817.

No. 3, Duchess Street, Portland Place, and chat with the old lady. Upon one occasion, as she was about to retire, he rose, offered her his arm, and led her to the door. When he had returned to his chair, Sir Charles Gregory, who was present, said to his guest: "You are the only man I know whom she would allow to do that."

Sometimes the late Lady Bancroft also was of the party. She has told us that,

> My husband and I often enjoyed Lady Gregory's society until the close of her long life. We often sat and gossiped at her house in Duchess Street, until her peaceful end. I seem still to see her saddened eyes, as, in answer to my farewell words, they accompanied her lips, which said, "And God bless *you*, my dear."

On December 28, 1895, Lady Gregory died, at the age of eighty-two. The funeral, which, according to her express wish, was strictly private, took place at the Brompton Cemetery. The actress bequeathed her estate to her husband, and a few mementoes to personal friends. Her portrait, as "Peg Woffington," went to Lady Bancroft, and the stick which she had used in 1884, as the "Nurse," went to Sir Squire Bancroft, in whose possession it still remains.[1]

On January 10, 1898, Sir Charles Gregory also passed away, and was buried beside his wife. The grave is on the west side of the main avenue of Brompton Cemetery, not very far from the Richmond Road entrance.

[1] Another had gone to Lady Pinero. See *ante*, p. 213.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONCLUSION

Mrs. Stirling's position among the players of the nineteenth century posterity alone can determine; but, however critically one may regard the actress, her extraordinary versatility, and the length and prominence of her stage-career, entitle her, beyond challenge, to a foremost place.

Summing up her chief characteristics as an actress, in the memories of those who knew her best, one recalls, at once, Miss Ellen Terry's words, in her autobiography:

> She (Mrs. Stirling) swept on to the stage, and in that magical way never to be learned, *filled* it. She had such breadth of style, such a lovely voice, such a beautiful expressive eye . . . her smile was the most fascinating, irresistible thing imaginable.

That voice, Mme. de Navarro told me, was rich and deep —sometimes almost masculine.

This powerful and dominant personality, it was—this knowledge of the largeness of her art—the "bigger, my dear, bigger," of the class-room—moulded with half a century of experience, that gave her the broad range, and the queenly distinction, so remarkable in this last exponent of the grand manner in comedy. At the same time—as Sir Frank Benson has pointed out—Mrs. Stirling was never of the old, stilted declamatory school, that Sir Arthur Pinero has satirized in "Trelawney of the Wells"—but was essentially natural and human, though not of a certain modern natural type, that is comparatively untrained, and reveals, upon occasion, some of the "naturalness" of the amateur. Moreover, she spoke her lines beautifully, because she felt them beautifully, and into every part in which she was really interested, could throw a compelling

animation, a truth, and a sincerity that enabled her, at times, to rise from mere impersonation to that loftiest and rarest of all histrionic achievements—absolute personification.

Yet this general effect, though due, in part, of course, to temperamental faculties that defy analysis, owed much also to scrupulous attention to minutest details. Nothing was so small as to be beneath her attention. Dame May Whitty told the writer that she still remembers Mrs. Stirling's advice to her: "Mind you dot your I's and cross your T's"; and the old "Nurse," it appears, used to say approvingly to her "Juliet," when they were reading Shakespeare together: "You pay attention to the author's punctuation; and so many of the younger people don't: but it is essential that they should do so, for our best editors, no doubt, give us Shakespeare's own punctuation pretty closely; and it must be adhered to." Still, while neglecting no detail that would complete the picture, Mrs. Stirling never lost her sense of proportion, nor failed to realize the greatness of the whole. As an expression of the ideal—besides an interpretation of the real—she was always conscious of the nobility of her art.

In private, as in public, Mrs. Stirling was a fine reader of Shakespeare; and among all the many Shakespearean parts she had played, none appealed to her more than "Rosalind." She read it several times to Miss Anderson, who thought it a very beautiful interpretation, though quite different from that of Helen Faucit.

The actress's greatest technical fault—noticeable, in some degree, from her early stage years, but more pronounced towards the close of her career—was an occasional tendency to over-accentuate, and to over-act—a weakness due to her intense desire to please. Again and again the pressmen comment upon this defect. Even so urbane and gracious a critic as Westland Marston wrote, concerning one of her later performances of "Mrs. Candour": "Poor dear, she makes wrinkles of what ought to be dimples!"

Of her completeness as an artist, nevertheless, there can be no question. Even her method of taking a call—the

finishing touch that is so often a great revealer of character [1]—was in itself a lesson in the grace and dignity of high art. No contemporary actor was her equal at such significant givings of thanks, nor are there many living to-day who suggest her method of appearing before the curtain, excepting, perhaps, Dame Gêneviève Ward—herself Mrs. Stirling's pupil in "Maritana"—who has something of her queenly presence.[2] The elder actress's method of doing homage reminded her contemporaries of Colley Cibber's well-known description of Mrs. Mountfort. "Down goes her dainty diving body to the ground, as if she were sinking under the conscious load of her own attractions . . . still playing her chest forward in fifty falls, and rising like a swan upon the waving water." In short, to quote once more one who is herself a great artist, a great giver—Miss Ellen Terry: "Mrs. Stirling, from the rise of the curtain until its last fall, just gave, gave, gave." And therein you have a powerful secret, perhaps the most potent secret, of all great and noble art.[3]

Nor must this gifted woman be wholly forgotten in her second, and lesser, public capacity, as an after-dinner speaker. When one considers the pleasure that such an art, well used, can give, and the ineffable and laborious dullness of the average post-prandial attempt, her oratorical efforts shine like good deeds in a naughty world. Sometimes, 'tis true, her fun, or her pun, was thin, and her humour occasionally cheap; but the adroit, facile, and often daring manner in which a multitude of topical subjects, and personalities of the day, were used to point her wit, and were drawn, by artful allusion, towards her ultimate purpose of extracting guineas for the fund, from the pockets of her hearers; the range of her ideas, the

[1] Not long ago I saw a well-known actor at a West-End theatre take a call with a pipe in his mouth, and two ladies beside him on the stage. No one, save myself, seemed to consider the incident unseemly.

[2] Dame Ward told me of "Maritana" when, during the winter of 1920, she was playing "Volumnia" in "Coriolanus" at the Old Vic. That lady also referred to the pleasure with which she remembered Mrs. Stirling in "Plot and Passion." Sir Squire Bancroft has the same recollection.

[3] I asked an actor who played much with Mrs. Stirling: "Who was her successor upon the English stage?" His answer was: "If she had a successor, it was Mrs. Kendal: and Mrs. Kendal has had no successor."

readiness of her illustration, the felicity of her antithesis, the allusive skill, and the simple eloquence, of her concluding appeals—all these graces—accompanied as they were by the charm of her personality, and technical excellence of her delivery—must have made her speeches a delight to listen to. That she had then no equal at the dining-table, nor, so far as I know, has had one since among her sister actresses, is suggested by the fact that for nearly twenty years she remained the principal speaker at those functions in King Street, St. James's.

My grandmother's ways, tastes and preferences, in private life, have been almost enough touched upon, in a record which is not intended to wander far outside her stage career. But a word or two may come in here.

While neither her speeches nor her letters reveal a really literary turn of mind, that she was interested in literature is evident, though her correspondence, it must be remembered, was dashed off impetuously, upon any piece of paper that might come handy, without forethought, for the eye of the reader alone, and, in most cases, with the primary intention of drawing a reply. As for her other accomplishments, she knew something of French, played occasionally in that language, sang with a certain skill, and could draw and paint ably in water-colours. One picture, at least, from her hand, hangs in the Savage Club.

Of her private life in general I know little, nor is it necessary to say much, though a moment's recapitulation may be interesting.

Mary Anne Hehl, as we have seen, was denied a full measure of that precious commodity, wise training at home. Cast at an early age, unbefriended, upon a difficult world, with her livelihood to earn, and the dangerous gifts of beauty and fascination, to help or hinder her progress, she made, as was most probable, the initial mistake of a rash and unhappy marriage, that was to disturb the under-current of her life, and lead her into many an eddy and backwater, before she found the main stream again. That the domestic instinct, at times, was strong in her, and that she longed often for safe harbourage, is positively certain. As some readers may remember, she wrote, on

one occasion, to Mrs. Baylis: "O, if mine was a really happy home, what a home-bird I should be!"[1]

But the trouble lay deeper than that. Mrs. Stirling, as well as artist, was idealist through and through; and for such there comes not easily a full measure of happiness, in a world like this. Admired and sought after as she was, the fascinating smile and the benignant good-humour were generally forthcoming at command; but, behind them, the face, in repose, was always sad, and the eyes wistful and far away. Until her latest years, at any rate, the woman's inner and intimate life lacked serenity and poise. Frequently impatient, and often hasty and impulsive in her actions, capable of strong likings, of equally strong dislikes, and of unreasoning prejudices, suffering fools sorrowfully, intolerant of failure in others, as well as in herself—because failure marred the harmony and largeness of her deeper concepts of life—Mrs. Stirling reveals herself as a complex, tragical-humorous figure of great and beautiful human import. The friend who knew her best declares that she had always an ear for conscience, a profound regard for rectitude, in her dealings with those about her, and that, beneath all her personal grandeur, there lay a deep humility, and a beautiful sense of the spiritual realities and diviner values of life. "She was a woman of genius, and a great and noble soul," one who—had her outward circumstance been somewhat different, and her life set a generation later in time—might easily have attained an even higher rank, in the history of the nineteenth-century stage, than posterity is now likely to accord her.

* * * * *

The individual passes; yet the torch is never extinguished. Handed down, the ancient traditions endure. Mrs. Stirling, as we have seen, had written, upon the stick that she gave to Lady Pinero, the words: "I am of the old school." Here was at once a confession, and a fact. Though her long span of life had brought her—before her

[1] She was always hospitable. Even Charles Reade's "Laura"—no friend to Mrs. Stirling—admits that.

final retirement—into the heyday of the new dramatic movement, she could not, in the nature of things, do more than observe, and give a hand to, such changes. She was not able to identify herself with them, any more than were others of her time, as, one by one, the old players vanished, while the drama went still upon its way, reflecting always, more or less faithfully, the thoughts of the age that had begotten it.

What path did our drama take? and whither goes it to-day?

Ibsen's influence, at present—having done what it had to do—seems to be passing, and the world's stage is being made ready for the advent of a new drama. Upon the form that drama will take, it would be idle to speculate; but we may easily observe a few tendencies already visible upon the horizon.

The war, as was inevitable, brought a season of theatrical futility, during which millions of individuals—seeking nepenthe wherever, or in whatever forms, it might be found—welcomed any sort of dramatic production, good, bad, or indifferent, that might hide them, for one instant, from the abhorrent actual. Those days have long passed; and now, while, with emptier purses, we proceed to set our ruined house in order, the drama must once more adjust itself to strangely altered conditions; though these conditions be so complex, and so involved, that many years must elapse, it seems, before the new work shall take shape, and be established.

For that reason we need not be at all dismayed, nor even much disappointed, if many plays recently put on in London are found to be actively vicious, or merely formless, meaningless, and inane. Here in England the frantic strife of armed millions has passed, in the triumph of the juster cause, but not with less fury the mental warfare is still being waged. Between the material and the spiritual there can never be truce; their enmity is permanent and implacable; and never more so than in years, such as these, of universal challenge and readjustment. That, surely, is why one hears it declared in the market-place: "Never before was so material an age; let us eat and

drink, for to-morrow we die!" while, at the next street corner, is gathered a group with vision enough to see and hear the ever-present spiritual forces whispering among the nations: "Say not Lo here! nor Lo there! for behold, the kingdom of God is within you!" Even the labour movement—though apparently concerned almost wholly with material reward—is probably, at bottom, more inherently idealistic than its loudest protagonists are aware; and other modern cults may be regarded, even by their bitterest opponents, as honest, if misguided, efforts to shake off a part, at least, of the heavy burden of materialism. The world, in fact, is seeking a truer statement of life, and the drama of the future should, and ultimately will, reflect that endeavour; only we must be ready to take long views, and to despair never of attainment. More than ever before in our history, we need plays that shall be true, beautiful, optimistic, with healthy laughter in them, and some spiritual perception, to brace and arm us for the fight. This we hope to get, and Mr. Storm Jameson may be right when he sees in "Abraham Lincoln" a forerunner of the newer and nobler school of drama, now, like the children in Maeterlinck's "Betrothal," eagerly awaiting rebirth.

We cannot yet form conclusions herein; still less can we prophesy; but one very hopeful tendency, at least already appears in the modern theatre; and that is unity of idea. By unity of idea we do not mean just team work, and the suppression of the star, as rightly encouraged, for example, by Mr. Bridges Adams, in his Shakespearean company; we refer to the increased attention being given everywhere, by the more æsthetic producers, to unity in the whole scheme of production, so that settings, costumes, lighting, and music shall all accord, co-operate, and blend into one harmonious whole.[1]

Another very encouraging sign of the times is the increased, and still increasing, interest in the drama shown throughout Britain by the populations of the villages and smaller towns—a movement that is fast making towards the establishment of a people's theatre in Western Europe.

[1] The Russian Ballet, it seems, has "had a word to say" here.

As for the cinema, one has often heard it said, of late, that the picture-houses are destroying the theatres. That they are injuring them financially, I agree; but that they will continue permanently to do so, I cannot believe. Rather I think that they will, in the end, create a new public for the theatre, by drawing towards legitimate drama people who otherwise might never have come within its influence. Great plays depend always for their effect upon living words spoken, with action, by an actor upon the stage; and surely the living soul can never be supplanted by his own photograph, however cunningly it may be focused, or however cleverly voiced by a gramophone behind the screen. Shakespeare has never yet been produced successfully in the picture-house, nor, perhaps, will he ever be. And, whatever one may say concerning the present, or the future, of the British theatre, it is necessarily to the matchless Elizabethan that we turn always, in the end: for generations of men—and their fashions with them—may come and go; but the vogue of the mighty ones is eternal.

APPENDIX

A LIST OF SOME OF THE PRINCIPAL PARTS PLAYED BY MRS. STIRLING.

(The dates are usually those of her first appearance.)

Date.	Theatre.	Title of Play.	Part.
1831 (?)	Coburg	Lovers' Vows (Kotzebue)	Amelia Wildenheim
1831 (?)	East London	The Pretender, or The Rose of Alvery (John Stafford)	
1832 Jan. 9	Pavilion	The Devil and the Widow	Zephyrina the Widow
Jan. 12	,,	Thirteen Years' Labour Lost	Lubin
Jan. 16	,,	The Shipwreck of the Medusa, or The Fatal Raft	Eugene
Jan. 16	,,	A Family Party, or The Philosopher Puzzled	Harriet
Jan. 23	,,	The Huguenots, or The Massacre of 1576	Marie de Noirmoutiers
Jan. 30	,,	The Man in the Iron Mask	Mdlle. Aubry
Jan. 30	,,	The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish	Faith Gough
Feb. 13	,,	Eugene Aram (Bulwer's Adaptation)	Elinor Lester
Feb. 13	,,	Masaniello	Elvira
Feb. 20	,,	Faustus, or The Demon's Bond	Rosalia
Feb. 24	,,	William Tell	Agnes
April 23	,,	Cherry and Fair Star, or The Orphan of Cyprus	Fair Star
May 9	,,	The Wreck Ashore (J. B. Buckstone)	Bella
May 19	,,	The Red Rover	Geraldine
June 18	,,	The Porter of Bagdad	Zarde
June 18	,,	The Witch of Tartary	Cepherenza
July 12	,,	A Woman Never Vext	Jane
July 16	,,	Billy Snivel and Sally Sly	Sophia Graceville
July 16	,,	Aladdin	Princess Badroulboudour
July 16	,,	Peter Wilkins	Peter Wilkins
July 31	,,	Blue Beard	Beda
Aug. 16	,,	Giovanni in London	Squalling Fan
Aug. 20	,,	Law and Lions	Jane Suavey
Aug. 21	,,	The Wild Boy of Bohemia	Countess Czartoryski
Oct. 3	,,	Lone Hut of Limehouse Creek	Fan
Oct. 3	,,	The Tower of Nesle, or The Black Gondola	Charlotte
Oct. 4	,,	The Irish Tutor	Rosa
Oct. 9	,,	The Iron Hand, or The Blacksmith of Warsaw	Moritz
Oct. 15	,,	The Dwarf of Naples	Amanda
Oct. 15	,,	Trial by Battle	Geraldine

Date.	Theatre.	Title of Play.	Part.
1832 Oct. 22	Pavilion	Black Hugh, or The Outlaw's Fate	Caroline
Oct. 22	,,	The Idiot Witness	Jeannette
1936 Jan. 1	Adelphi	A Dream at Sea (Buckstone)	Biddy Nutts
Jan. 3	,,	A Ghost Story	Catherine Graham
Jan. 18	,,	Luke Somerton	Louisa Somerton
Feb. 3	,,	Rienzi, the Last of the Tribunes	A minor part
March 7	,,	Victorine, or I'll Sleep On It (Buckstone)	Victorine
March 7	,,	The Unfinished Gentleman	
Oct. 3	,,	The Doom of Marana	
Oct. 30	,,	Rosina, or Am I a Princess ?	Rosina
Nov. 7	,,	A Flight to America (Lemon Rede)	Sally Snow
Dec. 5	,,	Paulina, or The Passage of the Beresina	Nanette
Dec.	,,	Grace Huntley	Grace Huntley
1837 Jan.	,,	Alexander the Great (Coyne)	
Jan. 9	,,	The Humours of an Election	Lucy Contest
Feb. 6	,,	The Peacock and the Crow (Parry)	Lady's Maid
Feb. 20	,,	Hassan Pacha, or The Arab's Leap	The Georgian
March 1	,,	Douglas (Leman Rede's Travesty)	Lady Randolph
March 27	New Strand	The Gallantie Showman, or Mr. Peppercorn	Fanny Flittermouse
April 24	,,	The Golden Calf (Jerrold)	Mrs. Mountjoy
May 8	,,	Venus in Arms	Arabella
May 24	,,	Nell Gwynne	Nell Gwynne
May 29	,,	Bachelors' Buttons (Stirling)	Emily Wilton
Sept. (?)	,,	Poachers in Petticoats	
Sept. 29	St. James's	The Young Widow	Amelia
Sept. 29	,,	Methinks I see My Father	
Oct. (?)	,,	A Day in Paris	
Oct. 26	,,	Natural Magic	Héloise de Mirancourt
Nov.	,,	The Miller's Maid	
Nov. 11	,,	Temptation, or The Vale of Sarnen	Ninette
Nov. 27	,,	Angéline	Angéline
Nov. 27	,,	The Cabinet	Curioso
Dec. 18	,,	The Siege of Belgrade	Catherine
Dec. 26	,,	Pascal Bruno	Pascal Bruno
1838 Jan. 3	,,	The Culprit	Mrs. Hussey
Feb. 6	,,	'Tis She, or Maid, Wife and Widow	
Feb. 6	,,	The Black Domino	Black Domino
March	Garrick, Whitechapel	A Married Rake	
March	,,	Angéline de Lys	Angéline
March	,,	Hunting a Turtle	
March 26	,,	The Maid of Switzerland	Gêneviève
March 30	,,	The Irresistibles	Victoria
April	St. James's	The Valet de Sham	
April	,,	The Brothers	Two characters
	[Provincial Tour, and First Retirement.]		
1839 April	Lyceum (formerly Opera House)	Lady Mary Wortley Montague, or Courtship and Matrimony in 1712	Lady Mary

Date.	Theatre.	Title of Play.	Part.
1839 Oct. 30	Drury Lane	Much Ado About Nothing	Beatrice
Nov. 8	,,	The Hypocrite	Charlotte
Nov. 10	,,	Englishmen in India	Sally Scraggs
Nov. 11	,,	Pizarro	Cora
Nov. 27	,,	A Woman's Trials	Ellen Marchmont
Dec. 4 (?)	,,	A Night in the Bastille	Gabrielle de Brionne
1840 Jan. 7	,,	Cupid's Diplomacy	"Albert" (Louis XV of France)
March 20	Olympic	The Ladies' Club (Mark Lemon)	The Chairwoman (Mrs. Fitzsmith)
April 1	,,	Gwynneth Vaughan (Mark Lemon)	Gwynneth Vaughan
Sept. 29	Haymarket	The Man of the World	Lady Rodolpha
Oct. (?)	,,	The Stranger	Countess Wintersen
Oct. (?)	,,	Town and Country	Rosalie Somers
Oct. (?)	,,	The Love Chase	Constance
Nov. (?)	,,	The Road to Ruin	Sophia
1841 Jan. 7	,,	Money (Bulwer)	Clara
Feb. 25	,,	The King and the Barber	Paghita
April 12	,,	The Rent Day (Jerrold)	Rachel Heywood
April 13	,,	Wild Oats	Lady Amaranth
May 3	,,	Money	Lady Franklin
May 12	,,	The Hunchback	Helen
May 17	,,	The Stranger	Countess Wintersen
May 18	,,	The Philosopher of Berlin	Amelia
May 19	,,	The Provoked Husband	Lady Grace
June 10	,,	Belford Castle (Lunn)	Comedy Lead
Sept. 17	,,	Riches (adaptation from Massinger)	Lady Traffic
Sept. 21	,,	Foreign Affairs	Baroness Fitzstoutz
(?)	,,	Venice Preserved	Belvidera
	[Temporary Retirement.]		
1842 Sept. 15	Haymarket	The Road to Ruin	Sophia
Oct. 1	Drury Lane	As You Like It	Celia
Oct. 29	,,	The Provoked Husband	Fanny
Oct. 29	,,	The Eton Boy	Fanny Curry
Nov. 16	,,	King Arthur (Dryden)	Emmeline
Nov. 19	,,	Love for Love (Congreve)	Mrs. Foresight
1843 Feb. 11	,,	A Blot on the 'Scutcheon (Browning)	Gwendolen
Feb. 25	,,	The Gamester	Charlotte
May 6	,,	The School for Scandal	Mrs. Candour
May 10	,,	The Jealous Wife	Lady Freelove
May 18	,,	Athelwold	Gilbertha
June 5	Strand	Rights of Women (Lunn)	Mrs. Blandish
July 3	,,	The Lady of the Lake	Ellen
July 10	,,	Aline, or the Rose of Killarney (Stirling, from Scribe)	Aline
Aug. 2	,,	The Ambassador's Lady (Wilks)	Lady Elizabeth
Aug. 2	,,	A Night of Surprise	
1844 Jan. 22	Drury Lane	Richard III	Queen Anne
May 28	,,	Daughter of the Regiment (she sang Donizetti's music)	Maria
May 28	,,	Black-Eyed Susan (Jerrold)	Susan
(?)	Princess's	Werner	Ida
Oct. 8	,,	Don Cæsar de Bazan	Maritana
Nov. 13	,,	A Widow Bewitched	Mrs. Lorimer
Nov. 27	,,	The Rent Day	Rachel Heywood

Date.	Theatre.	Title of Play.	Part.
1845 Feb. 10 (*circa*)	Princess's	Othello	Desdemona
March	,,	The Carbonari, or the Bride of Parma	Rebecca
March 26	,,	Metamora, the Last of the Wanpanoags	Oceana
April 4	,,	King Lear (with Forrest)	Cordelia
April 19	,,	The Hunchback (Knowles)	Helen
May 20	,,	The Chevalier St. George	Comtesse de Presle
Oct. 6	,,	Advice to Husbands	Mrs. Trevor
Oct. 6	,,	Katharine and Petruchio	Katharine
Oct. 15	,,	King Lear (with Macready)	Cordelia
Oct. 28	,,	Much Ado About Nothing (with Wallack)	Beatrice
Nov.	,,	The Merchant of Venice	Portia
Nov. 11 and 15	,,	As You Like It	Rosalind
Nov. 18	,,	The Violet	Blanchette
1846 Jan. 1	,,	Cricket on the Hearth	Dot
Feb. 2	,,	Richelieu	Julie de Mortemar
March 5	,,	The Ruins of Athens	Mercury
March 19	,,	The Dreamer	Lady Clara Bolton
April 14	,,	Ernestine	Ernestine
May 2	,,	Pizarro	Cora
May 20	,,	The King of the Commons (Rev. J. White)	Madeline Weir
July 1	,,	Merry Wives of Windsor	Mrs. Ford
Aug. 17	,,	A Curious Case	Mrs. Aubrey
Sept. 28	,,	Clarissa Harlowe	Clarissa Harlowe
Nov. 4	,,	A New Way to Pay Old Debts	Margaret
Nov. 26	,,	She Stoops to Conquer	Miss Hardcastle
Dec. 13	,,	The Heir at Law (Colman)	Cicely Homespun
Dec. 26	,,	Blanche de Valery	Blanche
1847 March 17	,,	Dream of the Heart	Hermine
March	,,	The Widow Bewitched	
April 5	,,	Midsummer Night's Dream	Hermia
April 26	,,	The Hunchback	Helen
May 25	,,	The Wonder	Donna Violante
June 1	,,	Romance and Reality	Florence
June 18	,,	King Lear (with Macready)	Cordelia
Oct. 18	Lyceum	The Two Queens	Mary of Denmark
Dec. 7	Covent Garden	Selections from Merry Wives	Mrs. Ford
Dec. 13	Lyceum	The Tragedy Queen (Oxenford, from Scribe)	Mrs. Bracegirdle
1848 Feb. 1	,,	A Curious Case	Mrs. Aubrey
March 23	,,	A Happy Family	Mrs. Catlin
July 10	Drury Lane	Henry VIII (Macready's Benefit)	Small Part
Sept. 4	Olympic	Time Tries All (Courtnay)	Laura Leeson
Oct. 2	,,	The Lady of Lyons	Pauline
Oct. 16	,,	Patronage	Edith
Oct. (?)	,,	The Honeymoon	Juliana
Oct. (?)	,,	Monsieur Jacques	
Oct. (?)	,,	First Champagne	
Oct. 24	,,	Katharine and Petruchio	Katharine
Oct. 30	,,	Lucille	Lucille
Nov. 13	,,	Love and Charity	Julia Amor
Nov. 20	,,	Cousin Cherry	Cousin Cherry
1849 Jan. 22	,,	The Brigands in the Bud	Ulric, Count of Bornholm
Feb. 12	,,	The Lost Diamonds (Stirling)	

Date.	Theatre.	Title of Play.	Part.
[Olympic Destroyed by Fire, March 29th, 1849.]			
1849 June 11	New Strand	Honesty is the Best Policy	Theresa
July 30	,,	Hearts are Trumps (Mark Lemon)	Miss Ruby
Aug. 20	,,	My First and Last Courtship	Lead
Sept. 6	,,	Where there's a Will there's a Way (J. M. Morton)	Princess Francesca
(?)	,,	Still Water Run Deep (Tom Taylor)	Mrs. Hector Sternhold
Oct. 9	,,	The Reigning Favourite (Oxenford's adaptation from Scribe and Legouvé)	Adrienne Lecouvreur
Nov. 12	,,	The Clandestine Marriage (Garrick and Colman)	Fanny
Nov. 26	,,	The Man Trap	Countess de Rosseille
Dec. 1	,,	She Stoops to Conquer	Miss Hardcastle
Dec. 5	,,	The Poor Gentleman (G. Colman the younger)	Emily Worthington
Dec. 11	,,	King René's Daughter	Iolanthe
Dec. 26	,,	Diogenes and His Lantern (Talfourd)	Minerva
1850 Jan. 21	,,	The Love Chase (Knowles)	Constance
Feb. 4	,,	A New and Peculiar Scene in the Life of an Unprotected Female (Stirling Coyne)	Polly Crisp
March 4	,,	Vicar of Wakefield (Tom Taylor)	Olivia
April 8	,,	Poor Cousin Walter (Palgrave Simpson)	Helen
June 10	,,	Power and Principle (Morris Barnett).	Louise Muller
Aug. 5	,,	A Daughter of the Stars (Shirley Brooks)	Miriam
Sept. 12	Olympic	Giralda, or The Invisible Husband (from Scribe)	Giralda
Oct. 14	,,	My Wife s Daughter (Stirling Coyne)	Mrs. Ormonde
Dec.	,,	The Merchant of Venice	Portia
(?)	,,	Speed the Plough (T. Morton the elder)	Susan Ashfield
1851 Jan. 13	,,	All that Glitters is not Gold (T. Morton the younger, and J. M. Morton)	Martha Gibbs
Feb. 21	,,	That Odious Captain Cutter (J. Palgrave Simpson)	The Widow Harcourt
March 17	,,	Charles King	Mimi
March 17	,,	My Wife's Second Floor	
April 21	,,	Sir Roger de Coverley (Tom Taylor's adaptation)	The Widow
May 7	,,	The Ladies' Battle (Charles Reade, from Scribe and Legouvé)	The Countess
June 15	,,	The Lost Diamonds	
Aug. 11	,,	Angelo (Victor Hugo)	Tisbe
Aug. 25	,,	Hearts are Trumps	
Dec. 9	,,	The Man of Law	Baronne de Vaubert
1852 Jan. 20	,,	London Assurance	Lady Gay
April 21	,,	Mind Your Own Business (Mark Lemon)	Fanny Morrison
June 16	,,	Married Life (Buckstone)	

Date.	Theatre.	Title of Play.	Part.
1852 June 22	Olympic	A Novel Expedient	Mrs. Moore
Nov. 20	,,	Masks and Faces (T. Taylor and C. Reade)	Peg Woffington
	[A Northern Provincial Tour.]		
1853 Oct. 17	Olympic	The Camp at the Olympic	
Oct. 17	Haymarket	Plot and Passion (T. Taylor and Lang)	Marie de Fontanges
1854 March	Olympic	To oblige Benson (T. Taylor, from French)	Mrs. Trotter Southdown
1854 (?) May	,,	Still Waters Run Deep	
1855 June 22	,,	School for Scandal (Mrs. Wigan's Benefit)	Lady Teazle
1856 Feb. 12	,,	Stay at Home (Slingsby Lawrence, G. H. Lewes)	Mrs. Metcalfe
May 26	,,	The Tragedy Queen	Mrs. Bracegirdle
May 26	,,	Wives as They Were, and Maids as They Are (Mrs. Inchbald)	
July 14	,,	A Conjugal Lesson	Miss Dorrillon
1857 Feb. 19	,,	A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing (T. Taylor, from French)	Anne Carew
Aug. 10	,,	The Subterfuge (re-opening under Robson and Emden)	
Oct. 19	,,	Leading Strings (A. G. Troughton, from Scribe)	Mrs. Leveson
1858 Feb.		Northern Tour	
April 19	Olympic	A Doubtful Victory (Oxenford)	Mrs. Flowerdale
June 8	,,	All in the Wrong	Lady Restless
Oct. 11	,,	The Red Vial (Wilkie Collins)	Mrs. Bergmann
1859 Sept. 24	,,	A Morning Call	Mrs. Chillingstone
1860 Jan. 16(?)	,,	The Head of the Family (adaptation from Alfred de Musset).	
Jan. 31	Windsor Castle	Nine Points of the Law	
July 25	Drury Lane	Brough's Benefit. Prologue to Burlesque "The Enchanted Isle" (The Brough Bros.)	
1861 Jan. 17	Windsor Castle	Masks and Faces (Command Performance)	Peg Woffington
March 6	Haymarket	A Duke in Difficulties (Tom Taylor)	Jocondo
	[Temporary Retirement, 1861–1863.]		
1863 Aug. 24	Adelphi	Hen and Chickens	Mrs. Soft Sawderley
1864 Aug. 29	,,	A Woman of Business (Ben Webster, Jun.)	Mrs. Hall
Oct.	St. James's	How Will They Get Out of It ?	
Oct.	,,	Woodcock's Little Game	
Nov. 30	Adelphi	The Workmen of Paris (from Drames du Cabaret)	Marguerite
1866 July 2	Princess's	The Huguenot Captain (Watts Phillips)	Jeanne d'Armenonville
1867 Dec. 4	Olympic	From Grave to Gay (Ben Webster, Jun., from Scribe)	Lady Diver Kidd
1868 Feb. 18	,,	A Woman of the World (Stirling Coyne, from French)	Mrs. Eddystone
1869 March 29	Adelphi	Black and White (Wilkie Collins and Charles Fechter)	

Date.	Theatre.	Title of Play.	Part.
1869 Easter Monday	New Queen's	Won by a Head (Tom Taylor)	
April 23	St. James's Hall	Midsummer Night's Dream (A Dramatic Reading with Music)	
1870 (*circa*)		New Men and Old Acres (Tom Taylor)	Lady Vavasour
1874 March 2	Drury Lane	Webster's Farewell Benefit	Mrs. Candour
1876 June 8	,,	Buckstone's Farewell Benefit	Mrs. Candour
1878 March 4	,,	Chatterton's Benefit	Recites "The Whaler's Fleet"
	[Return to the Stage.]		
1879 Sept. 22	Imperial (Aquarium)	The Beaux's Stratagem (Farquhar). (Mrs. Stirling spoke prologue by Clement Scott)	Lady Bountiful
1880	Haymarket	Played Mrs. Malaprop with the Bancrofts	
1882 March 8	Lyceum	Romeo and Juliet (with Ellen Terry)	The Nurse
Dec.	Vaudeville	The Rivals	Mrs. Malaprop
1883 Jan. 21	Haymarket	Caste (Robertson)	Marquise de St. Maur
Nov. 24	,,	Lords and Commons (Pinero) (her last original part)	Lady Caryll
1884 Nov. 1	Lyceum	Romeo and Juliet (with Miss Mary Anderson)	The Nurse
1885 March 25	Criterion	Mrs. Stirling and Mrs. Keeley spoke an address and rhymed epilogue by Clement Scott. (Matinée for National Aid Society's Sick and Wounded in London Fund)	
July 20	Haymarket	Retirement of Mr. and Mrs. Bancroft. Plays "Lady Franklin" in First Act of "Money"	
Oct. 29		Creswick's Benefit	Recites "Our Whaler Fleet"
Dec. 19	Lyceum	Faust (Wills) (with H. Irving and Ellen Terry)	Martha

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